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The Quill

Newsletter for the Barony of Nottinghill Coill

Monday, January 27, 2014

Musings from the Mad Monk: Plague Ships By Brother Amos the Pious

This has been a rough month for the Mad Monk. I have been recovering from a plague that has been sweeping through our fair barony. Luckily it is just a cold but it got me thinking about just how dangerous it was to get sick in the dark days before modern medicine.

A big factor in people getting ill was simple malnutrition. Most foods were seasonal and if a famine or pestilence took a crop it could leave entire villages and towns without essential nutrients that the body requires to fight off sickness and disease.

Another large factor was ignorance of simple sanitation practices, such as washing hands, which would lead to the rapid spread of sickness. One prevalent illness that resulted from poor sanitation was Dysentery, known then as “the Flux” or “Bloody Flux”, could cause death due to dehydration. In 1191 Philip II of France was forced to abandon the third crusade because of a case of the flux. Later, in 1596, while anchored off the coast of Panama, Sir Francis Drake died from an acute case at age 55.

Most afflictions of the skin were labeled as Leprosy, including severe fungal infections and Syphilis, which could cause lesions and deformation as well as seizures and dementia. True Leprosy, known today as Hansen’s Disease, is a bacterial infection that attacks the skin, eyes, cartilage and nervous system. In the 12th century the Benedictine Matthew of Paris estimated that there were as many as 19,000 leper hospitals throughout Europe. During the 12th century, one famous leper hospital located near Jerusalem was the Hospital of St. Lazarus, which spawned a military order made up entirely of leper knights. Lepers were thought by many to be going through purgatory on earth and therefore it was considered a holy affliction.

Tuberculosis has long been one of the most feared diseases, it has been discovered in human remains dating back as far as 7,000BC. The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates named it phthisis and identified it as the most widespread illness of his time. In the later Middle ages it was also known as Consumption because it seemed to consume victims from within. Upon seeing the afflicted, one 12th century inquisitor wrote that a dog shaped demon occupied the person and began to eat the lungs. In England and France during the 14th century, it was believed that the royal touch could cure Consumption and whole days were set aside for the Kings to touch the afflicted and give them alms.

One of the earliest documented plagues was the Antonine Plague of 165AD-180AD, which is now believed to have been either Smallpox or Measles. It killed as much as 30% of the population in some areas of Italy and decimated the Roman army. Smallpox most likely was introduced to Europe from Africa during the Islamic invasion of Spain in the 7th and 8th centuries, but it did not become endemic to Europe until it was brought home by soldiers returning from the crusades. The Persian physician Muhammad ibn Zakariya ar-Razi was the first to differentiate between the two in his 9th century treatise “The book of Smallpox and Measles”.

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Fevers were a very dangerous symptom of illness as it could cause permanent damage to the brain. One illness that caused fever was Malaria, known as Roman Fever because it was so prevalent during the Roman Empire. Typhus was a common illness first described in 1489AD during the Spanish siege of Moorish Granada. 3,000 men were lost in battle but an estimated 17,000 died of Typhus which was spread by fleas. Influenza, first described by Hippocrates, remains a major killer even in modern times killing 250,000 to 500,000 people worldwide every year. One early documented outbreak of influenza began in Russia in 1580 and spread through Europe killing 8,000 in Rome and killing entire towns in Spain. Little is known about Sweating Sickness which afflicted Europe between 1485-1551 but modern scholars believe that it could have been Hantavirus, a lung infection spread by rodents, due to the sudden onset of fever resulting in death within hours.

The worst of all Plagues to hit Europe was the Bubonic Plague. First documented in the 6th and 7th centuries it was known as the Plague of Justinian and killed 40% of Constantinople and 50% of Europe. after that it disappeared until the 14th century when it returned as the Black Plague in 1348-1350AD. The plague was transmitted through rat fleas carried aboard merchant ships from Asia. Most victims died within 2-7 days of the first symptoms and 80% of victims die within 8 days. By its end it had killed 30% to 60% of the European population and is estimated to have reduced the world population by a staggering 100,000,000 people by the year 1400AD. It took Europe 150 years to recover from the Black death which returned several times before finally disappearing in the 19th century.

In recreating the middle ages I found a love for the old ways and often wish to experience life back then. But modern medicine is definitely one thing that I do not wish to live without! I begin to ponder the old adage, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away". Now go wash your hands!

Pax Vobiscum - The Mad Monk

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