

THE CONQUEST OF PLAGUE

*A Study of the Evolution of
Epidemiology*

BY

L. FABIAN HIRST, M.D. LOND.

WITH A FOREWORD BY

LIEUT.-GENERAL SIR WILLIAM MACARTHUR
K.C.B., M.D., F.R.C.P.

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OF PLAGUE

When we survey the history of thought, and likewise the history of practice, we find that one idea after another is tried out, its limitations defined, and its core of truth elicited. . . . The proper test is not that of finality but of progress.

A. N. WHITEHEAD (1929), *Process and Reality*, p. 19
Cambridge University Press

FOREWORD

BY

LIEUT.-GENERAL SIR WILLIAM MACARTHUR

K.C.B., M.D., F.R.C.P.

THE author of this treatise, Dr. L. Fabian Hirst, can speak with authority on the subject of plague. During a period of twenty-two years he paid special attention to the disease in various parts of the Middle and Far East, particularly in Ceylon, where he began work in the newly built microbiological laboratory of Colombo in 1912. He at once undertook the systematic bacteriological examination of the city rodents and the study of their ectoparasites, i.e. two years before the first outbreak of plague there. Previously, in 1910, while Assistant Bacteriologist at University College Hospital Medical School, he had made a study of the ectoparasites of London rats in co-operation with his brother, the late Stanley Hirst, Acarinologist to the British Museum (Natural History).

Most of his researches have been concentrated on the parasitological and preventive aspects of plague. The results have appeared in some twenty publications, including papers in scientific journals, articles in the *British Encyclopaedia of Medical Practice*, and official reports. Unfortunately much matter published in Ceylon—e.g. his Memoir, *Researches on the Parasitology of Plague*, and his official Report, *The Protection of the Interior of Ceylon from Plague*—is not readily accessible to readers in Europe.

I know that Dr. Hirst has always taken particular pains to keep in touch with other plague workers. As a delegate to scientific conferences in India, a frequent visitor to laboratories in India, Burma, and Europe, and as a member of the League of Nations Expert Commission on Plague Research he has been able to make personal contact with leading authorities in this field. A severe illness in 1934 forced him to give up systematic laboratory work; during his long convalescence and since his restoration to health he has devoted much time to examining the enormous literature on plague in the Bodleian Library, the Library of the British Museum, and elsewhere.

Dr. Hirst has chosen his thesis wisely, for a study of the epidemiology of plague exemplifies the unity of the cosmos in more striking

fashion than any other branch of biological science, since it shows how human fate is intimately bound up with that of a vast variety of small mammals and their ectoparasites, and how they in turn respond to the influence of terrestrial climatic and solar change. We have come to realize further that seemingly minor variations in the structure and habits of particular species of fleas have major effects on the march of epizootic and epidemic disease among animals and man.

PREFACE

THIS book deals, in broad outline, with the age-long evolution of conceptions of the nature of plague. It ends with a brief account of those recent discoveries which have at last enabled man, not only to protect himself against this most ancient and most formidable of epidemic diseases, but even to cure most of the victims. It is not a history of plague epidemics nor a systematic textbook, but a study of the development of human beliefs about the origin of the malady from the era of primitive man to the present day.

Only in an historical setting can modern epidemiological ideas be understood: only when the subject is viewed from the historical standpoint can we realize the magnitude both of our debt to the pioneers of the past and of the task which still requires to be accomplished. For we are far from achieving an adequate grasp of the fundamental principles of epidemiological science. There is much that is mysterious in the mutability of microbic infections and in the appearance and disappearance of the great historic pandemics. Nevertheless, no branch of medicine has developed more rapidly in modern times from a pragmatic point of view. Our power of waging war against our microbic enemies and of safeguarding ourselves from their attacks has increased almost as rapidly as our power of destroying our human foes by lethal weapons. Nevertheless, we have yet to discover effective ways for extirpating the seeds of plague dormant from time immemorial among the wild rodents of remote regions of Asia. Since the world pandemic of our times began its spread in 1894, vast and intractable new reservoirs of campestral rodent plague have also been established in Africa and America.

This is an age of specialization, of ever more detailed analysis of natural phenomena. Considered as a whole, the present work is an attempt at synthesis. I am only too conscious of the rashness of a medical microbiologist who dares to trespass across the boundaries of so many specialized fields, including anthropology, astrology, philosophy, religion, meteorology, and the whole history of medicine. By so venturing I am inviting a barrage of criticism from those cognoscenti who may happen to dip into the pages of this wide-ranging treatise. I shall be happy if my modest effort serves to

stimulate thought. I cannot forbear to record my conviction that the modern process of scientific analysis may be positively harmful, both to the cause of truth and the welfare of humanity, if it is pursued to the neglect of synthesis in the light of reason and philosophy. We need to adopt a more holistic attitude to nature.

At least three volumes would be needed to deal at all comprehensively with the theme so briefly considered in this book. I originally planned a two-volume work; but the times are not propitious for the publication of massive and ambitious tomes. Accordingly my considerable mass of notes has been compressed into one volume. Much that some readers might think significant has, perforce, been omitted. It is believed, however, that enough references have been given to enable most gaps to be filled.

I hope that this volume will be useful to young investigators of the present and the future as a general introduction to the study of the most dreaded of all the major epidemic diseases. They will find ample scope for further advance and a full range of fascinating problems to tackle. I hope also that the book will interest public health officers, students of tropical medicine, lay administrators concerned with promoting the health of nations, and even members of the general public interested to see what light modern ecological research can throw on problems that have perplexed humanity through the ages. With that end in view I have tried to express myself in plain terms, relegating to the appendixes much technical matter of particular interest to specialists, and reducing statistical analysis of the data to a minimum.

Part I of the book deals with traditional conceptions of the nature of the disease. It has been greatly shortened, a chapter on medical astrology being reduced to a few pages.

Part II summarizes the work of modern research workers on the nature of plague, special attention being paid to the discoveries of the great pioneers, such as Yersin and Simond.

Part III contains a fairly full discussion of the effect of the local and geographical distribution of the chief species of rat fleas upon the spread of bubonic plague. I fear that the great practical importance of this factor is insufficiently realized by many authorities. The whole ecology of the insect must be taken into account, not merely the relative plague-transmitting power of the several species of fleas found in areas exposed to plague infection.

Part IV contains a very brief discussion of national and inter-

national plague-preventive measures. I stress the importance of the flea as an independent vehicle for the transport of infection from place to place by land or sea. The recent discovery of really effective pulicides and raticides, new antibiotics, such as streptomycin, and the sulpha drugs, has facilitated anti-plague campaigns to such an extent that it is not too optimistic to speak of the conquest of the disease. Further advances in our knowledge of the prophylaxis and treatment of plague are constantly being reported. Readers are referred to the various scientific bulletins, especially those issued by the World Health Organization, for the latest information.

I have chiefly relied on Georg Sticker's two volumes on *Pest* which form part of his *Abhandlungen aus der Seuchengeschichte und Seuchenlehre*, 1908 and 1910, Giessen, for the dates and various points in the history of plague epidemics. Charles Creighton's *History of Epidemics in Britain*, vols. 1 and 2, is my main authority for British plagues, supplemented by numerous tracts consulted in the Bodleian and British Museum Libraries and by papers published by Sir William MacArthur, who has made such a profound study of this subject. For accounts of medieval plagues I have relied on Sudhoff's *Archiv*, on papers by Charles and Dorothea Singer, and on translations into German by Dinānah and Müller of the chief Arabian plague tracts. Lynn Thorndike's great *History of Magic and Experimental Science* is replete with astrological lore, but I have refrained from quoting it. The sections of the book dealing with plague epidemics during the seventeenth and later centuries are almost entirely based on original sources.

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Many authorities have helped me with the preparation of this book. Dr. Sherwood Taylor, when Director of the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, read much of the first draft of Part I, and Dr. Ashworth Underwood, Director of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, the page proofs. Dr. R. Pollitzer of the World Health Organization has read the proofs of the chapter on Inter-human Plague, Dr. Neville Goodman of the British Ministry of Health those on the International Control of Plague, Dr. P. C. C. Garnham of the London School of Tropical Medicine the last section of Chapter XI. Sir William MacArthur has read the whole book. I am indebted to them all for very valuable suggestions for its improvement.

My thanks are due to a host of plague workers in all parts of the world who have sent me copies of their reports. Several of my most valued correspondents, including W. Glen Liston, G. F. Petrie, F. W. Cragg, L. Otten of Java, and Alexander Mitchell of South Africa, have passed away. Drs. C. R. Eskey of the United States Public Health Service, Dr. Wu Lien-Teh of China, and Dr. S. Nikanorov, Director of the Saratov Microbiological Institute of the U.S.S.R., are among the many experts who have visited my laboratory and subsequently sent me copies of their publications. I thank Dr. Karl Meyer and his colleagues of the University of California for particulars of recent research work.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

TEXT-FIGURES

1. Scenes in London during the Great Plague From a print in the Pepysian Collection.	page 54
2. Chart showing seasonal relationship between the incidence of rat and human plague in Bombay, 1905-6 Modified from Manson's <i>Tropical Diseases</i> (Cassell & Co., Ltd.).	139
3. Skulls of Black and Brown Rat, <i>R. rattus</i> and <i>R. norvegicus</i> Modified from Economic Series Pamphlet No. 8 by M. A. C. Hinton (1931), <i>Rats and Mice as Enemies of Mankind</i> , issued by British Museum (Natural History).	142
4. Showing diagnostic characters of chief species of <i>Xenopsylla</i> fleas From Manson's <i>Tropical Diseases</i> (Cassell & Co., Ltd.)	178
5. Diagram of blocked rat flea From article 'Plague' by L. F. Hirst in <i>British Encyclopaedia of Medical Practice</i> (Butterworth & Co. (Publishers), Ltd.).	184
6. Manchurian marmot (<i>Marmota bobac</i> Müller) After Plate V by S. I. Ognev in <i>Mammals of Russia and Adjacent Countries</i> (U.S.S.R. Academy of Science).	191
7. South-East Russian suslik (<i>Citellus pygmaeus</i> Pall.) After engraving by S. I. Ognev in above publication.	194
8. Ground squirrel (<i>Citellus beecheyi</i> Richardson) After Gustav Fischer.	197
9. South African gerbille (<i>Tatera lobengulae</i>) Drawn from photograph by W. Powell. Figs 7-9 are from sketches made by David Wicks of the Royal School of Art, South Kensington.	202
10. Seasonal incidence of three great plagues of London	261
11. Chart showing relation between rat and human plague in the Punjab From article 'Plague' by L. F. Hirst in <i>British Encyclopaedia of Medical Practice</i> (Butterworth & Co. (Publishers), Ltd.).	263
12. Chart showing relation between human plague and <i>X. cheopis</i> index From above-mentioned article 'Plague' by L. F. Hirst.	274
13. Chart showing effect of temperature on the longevity of plague fleas	329
14. Histogram showing Provincial Plague Mortality for first twenty years of Plague in India	349

15. Diagram showing *X. cheopis* percentage proportions in different types of premises in Colombo 353
16. Diagram showing magnitude of regional specific flea-indexes in Ceylon 355
- Figs. 15 and 16 by L. F. Hirst, in *Ceylon J. Sci.*, D, 1933, 3, 94, 84.

PLATES

- I. The Plague of the Philistines, by N. Poussin (1593-1665), in the Louvre. Note bodies of dead rats. Photograph by Archives Photographiques *facing page 16*
- II. The Great Plague of Marseilles, by J. F. de Troy (1679-1752), from engraving loaned by Dr. M. T. Morgan. The Chevalier de Rose is seen directing the clearance of corpses by convicts 64
- III. Napoleon Bonaparte touching plague sick in Jaffa, by Baron Gros (1804), in the Louvre. Photograph by Archives Photographiques 80
- IV. Portraits of Pioneers of Modern Plague Research. P. L. Simond, b. 1858, d. 1947. A. Yersin, b. 1863, d. 1943. A. W. Bacot, b. 1866, d. 1922, W. M. W. Haffkine, b. 1860, d. 1930 160
- V. Photomicrographs by B. H. Glass of three important species of fleas, *Xenopsylla cheopis* ♀, *Nosopsyllus fasciatus* ♀, and *Pulex irritans* ♂, and of rat tissue infected with *Pasteurella pestis* 176
- VI. Modern Plague protective costume reproduced from *Report on Plague in Queensland, 1900-7*, by A. Burnett Ham. Protective dress of a Marseilles doctor, 1720, after Manget, 1721 224

MAPS

- I. World Distribution of Plague in 1926 *page 297*
Much modified from map in Fourth Epidemiological Report of the Health Section of the League of Nations.
- II. Endemic foci of Plague in India, 1951 301
After M. Sharif (1951), *Bull. World Health Org.*, 4, 99.
- III. Distribution of Plague and *X. cheopis* in the areas surveyed in the Madras Presidency, Sept. 1928-April 1930 372
Modified from map in *Indian J. med. Res.*, 19, 357.

CONTENTS

PART I

TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE NATURE OF PLAGUE

CHAPTER I. PLAGUE AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF	I
<i>Plague, Primitive Animism, and the Occult</i>	I
<i>The Wrath of God as a Cause of Plague</i>	6
<i>Plague and Mass Psychology</i>	16
CHAPTER II. MIASMA AND CONTAGION	22
<i>Miasma, Contagion, and Astrology</i>	22
<i>Epidemic Doctrine and the Prevalent Types of Plague</i>	27
<i>Miasma in the Ancient World</i>	35
<i>Miasma in the Middle Ages</i>	38
<i>The Idea of Contagion</i>	45
CHAPTER III. MIASMA VERSUS CONTAGION	51
<i>An Historic Controversy</i>	51
<i>The Nature of the Plagues of London</i>	53
<i>The Marseilles Epidemic of 1720-1</i>	58
<i>Plague in Malta and the Ionian Islands</i>	63
<i>The Egyptian Plague of 1834-5</i>	65
CHAPTER IV. MICROBES AND MALADIES	73
<i>The Conception of Specific Infectious Disease</i>	73
<i>The Origins of the Germ Theory of Disease</i>	77
<i>Specific Micro-organisms and Epidemic Disease</i>	83
REFERENCES	97

PART II

MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE NATURE OF PLAGUE

CHAPTER V. THE PLAGUE BACILLUS	101
<i>The Origin of the Third Pandemic</i>	101
<i>The Discovery of the Plague Bacillus</i>	106
<i>Early Conceptions of the Mode of Microbic Infection</i>	111
(a) <i>The Alimentary Theory of Plague Transmission</i>	111
(b) <i>The Microbe and Contagion in India</i>	115
(c) <i>The Microbe and Miasma</i>	119

CONTENTS

xiii

PART III

THE SPREAD OF PLAGUE IN TIME AND SPACE

CHAPTER X. THE TEMPORAL SPREAD OF PLAGUE 254

The Periodicity of Epidemic Disease 254

The Seasonal Periodicity of Plague 260

Annual Variations in Plague Prevalence 280

CHAPTER XI. THE TERRITORIAL SPREAD OF PLAGUE 283

Localist Theories of Plague Infection 283

(a) *The Cadaveric Virus Theory* 284

(b) *Plague as a Disease of Filthy Places* 287

The World Distribution of Plague 296

The Migratory Movements of Rats and the Spread of Plague 303

The Dissemination of Plague in Merchandise 307

The Relative Role of Rats and Fleas in the Transference of Plague in Merchandise 320

CHAPTER XII. TERRITORIAL IMMUNITY TO PLAGUE 332

The Limited Spread of Plague in Modern Times 332

The Modern Immunity of Temperate Regions from Plague 333

The Spread of Plague in the East Indies 348

(a) *The Immunity of Eastern Bengal and Assam from Plague* 348

(b) *The Spread of Plague in Southern India and Ceylon* 351

REFERENCES 373

PART IV

THE CONQUEST OF PLAGUE

CHAPTER XIII. THE INTERNATIONAL CONTROL OF PLAGUE 378

Maritime Quarantine against Plague 378

The International Sanitary Conventions 388

The Prevention of the International Exchange of Plague Rats 394

The Prevention of the International Exchange of Plague Fleas 399

CHAPTER XIV. THE NATIONAL CONTROL OF BUBONIC PLAGUE 406

Anti-contagion 406

Early Attempts to Control Microbic Plague Infection 415

<i>The Appreciation of the Epidemiological Situation in a Plague Area</i>	421
<i>The Tactics of the War against Bubonic Plague</i>	423
(a) <i>The War against Rats</i>	424
(b) <i>The Eradication of Foci of Plague Infection</i>	430
(c) <i>Prevention of the Dissemination of Plague Inland</i>	436
<i>Personal Protection against Infection by Bubonic Plague</i>	439
(a) <i>Protection against Flea-bites</i>	439
(b) <i>Active Immunization with Anti-plague Vaccines</i>	440
(c) <i>Chemoprophylaxis</i>	445
(d) <i>The Bacteriophage as an Aid to Plague Prophylaxis</i>	446
<i>The Modern Treatment of Human Plague</i>	447
(a) <i>Serum Therapy and Prophylaxis</i>	448
(b) <i>Chemotherapy of Plague</i>	449
<i>Conclusion</i>	450
REFERENCES	453
APPENDIXES	456
A. <i>The Measurement of Rat-flea Density</i>	456
B. <i>The Plague-transmitting Power of Fleas</i>	459
C. <i>The Role of Blood-sucking Ectoparasites other than Fleas</i>	464
D. <i>The Appetite of Fleas for Human Blood</i>	467
REFERENCES	468
AUTHOR INDEX	469
SUBJECT INDEX	474

PART I

TRADITIONAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE NATURE OF PLAGUE

I

PLAGUE AND SUPERNATURAL BELIEF

Plague, Primitive Animism, and the Occult

PRIMITIVE man lived in psychic union with his fellows and with everything in nature. For him the whole universe was animated, including the shining stars, the whispering woods, the bubbling streams, and even mother earth herself. Neglected ancestral shades, or offended spirits animating some venerated object, were responsible for all afflictions, including pestilence. Yet the multitudinous demons that man feared so much were not omnipotent. They could be exorcised by the proper incantations, or their powers neutralized by magic. The tribal sorcerer was the physician.

Throughout human history, demons have been accused of generating plagues and many attempts have been made to drive them away by magical procedures. In ancient Babylonia, some 3,000 years before our era, Namtar, demon of plague and other epidemics, periodically emerged from hell.¹ It was he who accompanied the goddess Ishtar in her descent to the infernal regions and he who roamed the night afflicting man. There is a legend that an Irish pestilence of 1084 was caused by battalions of demons darting swords of fire from their throats and each as high as the clouds of heaven.² During plague-time in Egypt evil spirits were said to prick people with a magic lance poisoned by Lucifer.³ Procopius,⁴ in his account of the Byzantine epidemic of A.D. 542, makes much of the appearance of spectres in human shape to many who fell ill of plague. Unceasing expiation, prayers to the most holy names, failed to avert the fate of those who saw the apparition. Some shut themselves up in houses, hoping to bar the way to the plague demons; others saw the fatal vision in a dream and heard a voice pronouncing their doom. Procopius was a