



Paul Slack

# PLAGUE

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Paul Slack



常州大学 PLAQUE  
藏书 A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Paul Slack 2012

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose the same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Data available

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain by  
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

ISBN: 978-0-19-958954-8

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

## Plague: A Very Short Introduction

VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS are for anyone wanting a stimulating and accessible way in to a new subject. They are written by experts, and have been published in more than 25 languages worldwide.

The series began in 1995, and now represents a wide variety of topics in history, philosophy, religion, science, and the humanities. The VSI library now contains 300 volumes –a Very Short Introduction to everything from ancient Egypt and Indian philosophy to conceptual art and cosmology –and will continue to grow in a variety of disciplines.

### Very Short Introductions available now:

ADVERTISING Winston Fletcher

AFRICAN HISTORY John Parker and  
Richard Rathbone

AGNOSTICISM Robin Le Poidevin

AMERICAN IMMIGRATION  
David A. Gerber

AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES  
AND ELECTIONS L. Sandy Maisel  
THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY  
Charles O. Jones

ANARCHISM Colin Ward

ANCIENT EGYPT Ian Shaw

ANCIENT GREECE Paul Cartledge

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY Julia Annas  
ANCIENT WARFARE

Harry Sidebottom

ANGELS David Albert Jones

ANGLICANISM Mark Chapman

THE ANGLO-SAXON AGE John Blair  
THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Peter Holland

ANIMAL RIGHTS David DeGrazia

ANTISEMITISM Steven Beller

THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS  
Paul Foster

ARCHAEOLOGY Paul Bahn

ARCHITECTURE Andrew Ballantyne

ARISTOCRACY William Doyle

ARISTOTLE Jonathan Barnes

ART HISTORY Dana Arnold

ART THEORY Cynthia Freeland

ATHEISM Julian Baggini

AUGUSTINE Henry Chadwick

AUTISM Uta Frith

THE AZTECS David Carrasco

BARTHES Jonathan Culler

BEAUTY Roger Scruton

BESTSELLERS John Sutherland

THE BIBLE John Riches

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY  
Eric H. Cline

BIOGRAPHY Hermione Lee

THE BLUES Elijah Wald

THE BOOK OF MORMON  
Terry Givens

THE BRAIN Michael O'Shea

BRITISH POLITICS Anthony Wright

BUDDHA Michael Carrithers

BUDDHISM Damien Keown

BUDDHIST ETHICS Damien Keown

CANCER Nicholas James

CAPITALISM James Fulcher

CATHOLICISM Gerald O'Collins

THE CELL Terence Allen and  
Graham Cowling

THE CELTS Barry Cunliffe

CHAOS Leonard Smith

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE  
Kimberley Reynolds

CHINESE LITERATURE

Sabina Knight

CHOICE THEORY Michael Allingham

CHRISTIAN ART Beth Williamson

CHRISTIAN ETHICS D. Stephen Long

CHRISTIANITY Linda Woodhead

CITIZENSHIP Richard Bellamy

CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY  
Helen Morales

CLASSICS Mary Beard and  
John Henderson  
CLAUSEWITZ Michael Howard  
THE COLD WAR Robert McMahon  
COLONIAL LATIN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE Rolena Adorno  
COMMUNISM Leslie Holmes  
THE COMPUTER Darrel Ince  
THE CONQUISTADORS  
Matthew Restall and  
Felipe Fernandez-Armesto  
CONSCIENCE Paul Strohm  
CONSCIOUSNESS Susan Blackmore  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
Julian Stallabrass  
CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY  
Simon Critchley  
COSMOLOGY Peter Coles  
CRITICAL THEORY  
Stephen Eric Bronner  
THE CRUSADES Christopher Tyerman  
CRYPTOGRAPHY Fred Piper and  
Sean Murphy  
THE CULTURAL  
REVOLUTION Richard Curt Kraus  
DADA AND SURREALISM  
David Hopkins  
DARWIN Jonathan Howard  
THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS Timothy Lim  
DEMOCRACY Bernard Crick  
DERRIDA Simon Glendinning  
DESCARTES Tom Sorell  
DESERTS Nick Middleton  
DESIGN John Heskett  
DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY  
Lewis Wolpert  
DICTIONARIES Lynda Mugglestone  
DINOSAURS David Norman  
DIPLOMACY Joseph M. Siracusa  
DOCUMENTARY FILM  
Patricia Aufderheide  
DREAMING J. Allan Hobson  
DRUGS Leslie Iversen  
DRUIDS Barry Cunliffe  
EARLY MUSIC Thomas Forrest Kelly  
THE EARTH Martin Redfern  
ECONOMICS Partha Dasgupta  
EGYPTIAN MYTH Geraldine Pinch  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN  
Paul Langford

THE ELEMENTS Philip Ball  
EMOTION Dylan Evans  
EMPIRE Stephen Howe  
ENGELS Terrell Carver  
ENGLISH LITERATURE Jonathan Bate  
ENVIRONMENTAL ECONOMICS  
Stephen Smith  
EPIDEMIOLOGY Rodolfo Saracci  
ETHICS Simon Blackburn  
THE EUROPEAN UNION  
John Pinder and Simon Usherwood  
EVOLUTION Brian and  
Deborah Charlesworth  
EXISTENTIALISM Thomas Flynn  
FASCISM Kevin Passmore  
FASHION Rebecca Arnold  
FEMINISM Margaret Walters  
FILM Michael Wood  
FILM MUSIC Kathryn Kalinak  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR  
Michael Howard  
FOLK MUSIC Mark Slobin  
FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY  
David Canter  
FORENSIC SCIENCE Jim Fraser  
FOSSILS Keith Thomson  
FOUCAULT Gary Gutting  
FREE SPEECH Nigel Warburton  
FREE WILL Thomas Pink  
FRENCH LITERATURE John D. Lyons  
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  
William Doyle  
FREUD Anthony Storr  
FUNDAMENTALISM Malise Ruthven  
GALAXIES John Gribbin  
GALILEO Stillman Drake  
GAME THEORY Ken Binmore  
GANDHI Bhikhu Parekh  
GENIUS Andrew Robinson  
GEOGRAPHY John Matthews and  
David Herbert  
GEOPOLITICS Klaus Dodds  
GERMAN LITERATURE Nicholas Boyle  
GERMAN PHILOSOPHY  
Andrew Bowie  
GLOBAL CATASTROPHES Bill McGuire  
GLOBAL ECONOMIC HISTORY  
Robert C. Allen  
GLOBAL WARMING Mark Maslin  
GLOBALIZATION Manfred Steger

THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE  
NEW DEAL Eric Rauchway  
HABERMAS James Gordon Finlayson  
HEGEL Peter Singer  
HEIDEGGER Michael Inwood  
HERODOTUS Jennifer T. Roberts  
HIEROGLYPHS Penelope Wilson  
HINDUISM Kim Knott  
HISTORY John H. Arnold  
THE HISTORY OF ASTRONOMY  
Michael Hoskin  
THE HISTORY OF LIFE  
Michael Benton  
THE HISTORY OF MATHEMATICS  
Jacqueline Stedall  
THE HISTORY OF  
MEDICINE William Bynum  
THE HISTORY OF TIME  
Leofranc Holford-Strevens  
HIV/AIDS Alan Whiteside  
HOBBS Richard Tuck  
HUMAN EVOLUTION Bernard Wood  
HUMAN RIGHTS Andrew Clapham  
HUMANISM Stephen Law  
HUME A. J. Ayer  
IDEOLOGY Michael Freeden  
INDIAN PHILOSOPHY  
Sue Hamilton  
INFORMATION Luciano Floridi  
INNOVATION Mark Dodgson and  
David Gann  
INTELLIGENCE Ian J. Deary  
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION  
Khalid Koser  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
Paul Wilkinson  
ISLAM Malise Ruthven  
ISLAMIC HISTORY Adam Silverstein  
ITALIAN LITERATURE  
Peter Hainsworth and David Robey  
JESUS Richard Bauckham  
JOURNALISM Ian Hargreaves  
JUDAISM Norman Solomon  
JUNG Anthony Stevens  
KABBALAH Joseph Dan  
KAFKA Ritchie Robertson  
KANT Roger Scruton  
KEYNES Robert Skidelsky  
KIERKEGAARD Patrick Gardiner  
THE KORAN Michael Cook

LANDSCAPES AND  
GEOMORPHOLOGY  
Andrew Goudie and Heather Viles  
LATE ANTIQUITY Gillian Clark  
LAW Raymond Wacks  
THE LAWS OF THERMODYNAMICS  
Peter Atkins  
LEADERSHIP Keith Grint  
LINCOLN Allen C. Guelzo  
LINGUISTICS Peter Matthews  
LITERARY THEORY Jonathan Culler  
LOCKE John Dunn  
LOGIC Graham Priest  
MACHIARELLI Quentin Skinner  
MADNESS Andrew Scull  
MAGIC Owen Davies  
THE MARQUIS DE SADE John Phillips  
MARTIN LUTHER Scott H. Hendrix  
MARX Peter Singer  
MATHEMATICS Timothy Gowers  
THE MEANING OF LIFE  
Terry Eagleton  
MEDICAL ETHICS Tony Hope  
MEDIEVAL BRITAIN  
John Gillingham and Ralph A. Griffiths  
MEMORY Jonathan K. Foster  
MICHAEL FARADAY  
Frank A. J. L. James  
MODERN ART David Cottington  
MODERN CHINA Rana Mitter  
MODERN FRANCE  
Vanessa R. Schwartz  
MODERN IRELAND Senia Pašeta  
MODERN JAPAN  
Christopher Goto-Jones  
MODERN LATIN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE  
Roberto González Echevarría  
MODERNISM Christopher Butler  
MOLECULES Philip Ball  
MORMONISM  
Richard Lyman Bushman  
MUHAMMAD Jonathan A. C. Brown  
MULTICULTURALISM Ali Rattansi  
MUSIC Nicholas Cook  
MYTH Robert A. Segal  
NATIONALISM Steven Grosby  
NELSON MANDELA Elleke Boehmer  
NEOLIBERALISM  
Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy

THE NEW TESTAMENT  
     Luke Timothy Johnson  
 THE NEW TESTAMENT AS  
     LITERATURE Kyle Keefer  
 NEWTON Robert Iliffe  
 NIETZSCHE Michael Tanner  
 NINETEENTH-CENTURY  
     BRITAIN Christopher Harvie  
     and H. C. G. Matthew  
 THE NORMAN CONQUEST  
     George Garnett  
 NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS  
     Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green  
 NORTHERN IRELAND  
     Marc Mulholland  
 NOTHING Frank Close  
 NUCLEAR POWER Maxwell Irvine  
 NUCLEAR WEAPONS  
     Joseph M. Siracusa  
 NUMBERS Peter M. Higgins  
 THE OLD TESTAMENT  
     Michael D. Coogan  
 ORGANIZATIONS Mary Jo Hatch  
 PAGANISM Owen Davies  
 PARTICLE PHYSICS Frank Close  
 PAUL E. P. Sanders  
 PENTECOSTALISM William K. Kay  
 THE PERIODIC TABLE Eric R. Scerri  
 PHILOSOPHY Edward Craig  
 PHILOSOPHY OF LAW  
     Raymond Wacks  
 PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE  
     Samir Okasha  
 PHOTOGRAPHY Steve Edwards  
 PLAGUE Paul Slack  
 PLANETS David A. Rothery  
 PLATO Julia Annas  
 POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY  
     David Miller  
 POLITICS Kenneth Minogue  
 POSTCOLONIALISM Robert Young  
 POSTMODERNISM Christopher Butler  
 POSTSTRUCTURALISM  
     Catherine Belsey  
 PREHISTORY Chris Gosden  
 PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY  
     Catherine Osborne  
 PRIVACY Raymond Wacks  
 PROGRESSIVISM Walter Nugent  
 PROTESTANTISM Mark A. Noll

PSYCHIATRY Tom Burns  
 PSYCHOLOGY Gillian Butler and  
     Freda McManus  
 PURITANISM Francis J. Bremer  
 THE QUAKERS Pink Dandelion  
 QUANTUM THEORY  
     John Polkinghorne  
 RACISM Ali Rattansi  
 THE REAGAN REVOLUTION Gil Troy  
 REALITY Jan Westerhoff  
 THE REFORMATION Peter Marshall  
 RELATIVITY Russell Stannard  
 RELIGION IN AMERICA Timothy Beal  
 THE RENAISSANCE Jerry Brotton  
 RENAISSANCE ART  
     Geraldine A. Johnson  
 RISK Baruch Fischhoff and John Kadvany  
 ROMAN BRITAIN Peter Salway  
 THE ROMAN EMPIRE  
     Christopher Kelly  
 ROMANTICISM Michael Ferber  
 ROUSSEAU Robert Wokler  
 RUSSELL A. C. Grayling  
 RUSSIAN HISTORY Geoffrey Hosking  
 RUSSIAN LITERATURE Catriona Kelly  
 THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION  
     S. A. Smith  
 SCHIZOPHRENIA Chris Frith and  
     Eve Johnstone  
 SCHOPENHAUER Christopher Janaway  
 SCIENCE AND RELIGION  
     Thomas Dixon  
 SCIENCE FICTION David Seed  
 THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION  
     Lawrence M. Principe  
 SCOTLAND Rab Houston  
 SEXUALITY Véronique Mottier  
 SHAKESPEARE Germaine Greer  
 SIKHISM Eleanor Nesbitt  
 SLEEP Steven W. Lockley and  
     Russell G. Foster  
 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
     ANTHROPOLOGY  
     John Monaghan and Peter Just  
 SOCIALISM Michael Newman  
 SOCIOLOGY Steve Bruce  
 SOCRATES C. C. W. Taylor  
 THE SOVIET UNION Stephen Lovell  
 THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR  
     Helen Graham

SPANISH LITERATURE Jo Labanyi  
SPINOZA Roger Scruton  
STATISTICS David J. Hand  
STEM CELLS Jonathan Slack  
STUART BRITAIN John Morrill  
SUPERCONDUCTIVITY  
Stephen Blundell  
TERRORISM Charles Townshend  
THEOLOGY David F. Ford  
THOMAS AQUINAS Fergus Kerr  
TOCQUEVILLE Harvey C. Mansfield  
TRAGEDY Adrian Poole  
THE TUDORS John Guy  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN  
Kenneth O. Morgan

THE UNITED NATIONS  
Jussi M. Hanhimäki  
THE U.S. CONGRESS Donald A. Ritchie  
THE U.S. SUPREME COURT  
Linda Greenhouse  
UTOPIANISM Lyman Tower Sargent  
THE VIKINGS Julian Richards  
VIRUSES Dorothy H. Crawford  
WITCHCRAFT Malcolm Gaskill  
WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling  
WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman  
THE WORLD TRADE  
ORGANIZATION Amrita Narlikar  
WRITING AND SCRIPT  
Andrew Robinson

### Available soon:

ENGINEERING David Blockley  
PROBABILITY John Haigh  
PLANTS Timothy Walker

ANAESTHESIA  
Aidan O'Donnell  
RIVERS Nick Middleton

For more information visit our website  
[www.oup.com/vsi/](http://www.oup.com/vsi/)

# Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many colleagues with whom I have discussed plague and plagues over the years, to Luciana O'Flaherty who first suggested this *Very Short Introduction* to me, and to others at OUP, Andrea Keegan and Emma Marchant, who have helped me bring it to a conclusion. The anonymous readers for the Press saved me from many errors of fact and interpretation, and responsibility for those which remain is solely mine.

# List of illustrations

- 1 A London burial pit, probably in use during the plague of 1665–6 **3**  
Wellcome Library, London
- 2 Alexandre Yersin outside his hut in Hong Kong, 1894 **5**  
HKU-Pasteur Research Centre, Institut Pasteur, and Antoine Danchin
- 3 A plague patient with a bubo in his armpit **6**  
CDC/Margaret Parsons, Dr Karl F. Meyer
- 4 The movement of plague across Europe 1347–50 **19**
- 5 Naples in the plague of 1656 **29**  
Capodimonte Museum, Naples.  
© Alinari/TopFoto
- 6 Plague in the Mediterranean, c. 1790 **31**  
Adapted from Daniel Panzac, *Quarantaines et Lazarets: l'Europe et la peste d'Orient* (Édisud, Aix-en-Provence, 1986)
- 7 Burying victims of plague in Tournai, 1349 **36**  
© The Granger Collection/TopFoto
- 8 A Dance of Death from the late 15th century **47**
- 9 A procession of flagellants in 1349 **49**  
© The Granger Collection/TopFoto
- 10 Pope Gregory the Great leading a procession during the plague of 590 in Rome, from a 15th-century manuscript **57**  
Musée Condé, Chantilly (Ms 65/1284 f.71v). © The Bridgeman Art Library
- 11 Plague saints, Sebastian and Roch, pictured in 1475 **59**  
Bagatti Valsecchi Museum, Milan.  
© akg-images/Electa
- 12 Plague mortality in Italian cities in 1348 and in London in 1665–6 **61**  
(a) Based on S. K. Cohn Jr, *The Black Death Transformed* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2002),  
p. 157; (b) Based on W. G. Bell, *The  
Great Plague in London in 1665*  
(London: Bodley Head, 1924)

- 13 Death and flight outside the  
walls of London in 1625 **69**

© 2004 TopFoto

- 14 Information for Londoners in  
a broadsheet of 1665 **80**

Ashmolean Museum, University of  
Oxford

- 15 A committee charged with  
plague control in Karachi,  
1897 **86**

Wellcome Library, London

- 16 The Karachi segregation camp  
being disinfected, 1897 **88**

Wellcome Library, London

- 17 Santa Maria della Salute,  
built after the plague of 1630  
in Venice **97**

© soundsnaps/Fotolia.com

- 18 Nicolas Poussin, *The Plague of  
Ashdod*, painted 1630–1 **98**

Louvre, Paris. © Masterpics/Alamy

- 19 A physician wearing  
protective clothing against  
plague in 1656 **99**

© Bettmann/Corbis

# Introduction

Everyone knows something about plague. They may have come across it as a cause of high mortality in the past, in the 'Black Death' of 1348 or the 'Great Plague of London' in 1665, or learned from newspapers that it is a disease still active among rodents and occasionally among humans in the modern world. They may have read about the possibility of its use as a weapon of war or terrorism, or seen 'plague' used as a metaphor for other real or fictional calamities and wondered about the history that lies behind it. This little book is designed for those who want to know more, and as a brief introduction to what is now a very large scholarly and popular literature accumulated around plague, much of it questioning the identity, causes, and effects of past epidemic disasters.

My approach is that of an historian, interested in understanding the impact of great epidemic diseases in the past and the ways in which they have been interpreted. The conclusions (and speculations) arising from modern medical and environmental science will have a place, chiefly in the first three chapters, since they help to explain the incidence and effects of plague in the past and are part of its cultural impact in the present. But I have tried also, in the second half of the book, to explain what plague meant for those who suffered from it in earlier centuries, for the governments and public authorities who set out to fight it, and for the authors, past and present, who have written about it.

The history of plague, like that of many other epidemic diseases, is full of unexpected twists and turns, and its course is often as difficult to explain today, with all the benefits of medical hindsight, as it was for people who experienced it in the past. That is part of the subject's perennial fascination. But its interest lies also in the ways in which people coped with sudden death and disease in earlier centuries and somehow came to terms with them. My aim is therefore to look at plague from a variety of angles, and to try to see it finally in proportion and in its historical context. The book is arranged by themes rather than as a straightforward chronology, but I hope that it brings out some of the important continuities in the story which can be observed over time, and the lessons that were learned, and can still perhaps be learned, from them.

Oxford, 26 August 2011

# Contents

Acknowledgements xi

List of illustrations xiii

Introduction xv

- 1 Plague: what's in a name? 1
- 2 Pandemics and epidemics 17
- 3 Big impacts: the Black Death 35
- 4 Private horrors 53
- 5 Public health 74
- 6 Enduring images 94
- 7 The lessons of histories 113

References 121

Further reading 127

Index 133

# Chapter 1

## **Plague: what's in a name?**

Names are always important because they create identities. They are particularly important when it comes to diseases, where a name, a diagnosis, carries with it some reassurance that the phenomenon is known and understood. It may nowadays indicate its characteristic symptoms, as with 'AIDS', or the pathogen responsible for them, as with 'HIV', and so offer some prospect of treatment and perhaps cure. The names of diseases, and especially those of epidemic diseases, often have very long histories, however. They have sometimes been applied to past illnesses with symptoms which modern medical science has shown to be caused by more than one biological agent. Leprosy and 'the great pox' are examples.

The identity of plague is a classic case of uncertainty of this kind. It is susceptible to a variety of interpretations, and its identity has been the subject of much dispute. In its Greek and Latin origin, 'plague' meant a blow, something sudden and acute, and in general parlance it has often been employed as a generic term, applicable to almost any calamity, and to pests like locusts as well as to human and animal diseases of many kinds. The sense in which it is used in this book, and in many larger works on which this one draws, is more precise, though still sometimes contentious. 'Plague' is the word that has been used over the centuries to denote an epidemic disease of particular severity and

dramatic impact, and a disease which probably always had the same causative agent, now known to have been a bacillus, *Yersinia pestis*.

Across most of its recorded history, plague has been distinguished from other epidemic diseases in two ways. First, it killed more people more quickly. In major outbreaks in European cities between the 14th and the 17th centuries, it was not unusual for one-quarter of the population to die within a year, and it is likely that almost as many more might have been infected and then have recovered. In terms of mortality and morbidity, plague's only rivals may be the worldwide Spanish flu of 1918–19 and the smallpox which Europeans took to the Americas after 1492. Each of those disasters was undoubtedly of great historical significance, but neither has left the long written record of recurrent epidemics that allows the history of plague to be written.

The second distinguishing feature of plague, evident from that long series of records, lies in the special horrors which it inflicted on its victims and which threatened all around them. The more elaborate descriptions, most of them surviving from the 14th century onwards, commonly refer to the extreme delirium, fever, and painful tumours of the sick, and to the putrid matter issuing from their sores, mouths, and nostrils which could contaminate anyone nearby. 'The breath is so stinking', one French physician recorded in 1666, 'that it is virtually intolerable; thus the common proverb in French is true, "one smells of plague"'. Easily sensed and identified, polluting whole cities, that cause of private suffering and collective disaster has, since at least the 6th century AD, been given the same name: plague or pestilence, *pestis* in Latin, and sometimes *the* plague or *the* pestilence.

This book will focus on the history of the disease in major epidemic form, so far as that is known, and in periods when its ravages were most pronounced, down to the first decades of the 20th century. Since the 1920s, partly thanks to public health