

Acknowledgements

These essays were originally delivered as papers at a conference held at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, in 2006. The theme of the conference was suggested by Lloyd and Dorothy Moote, familiar visitors to the Centre, who had just published their important study of the 1665 plague in London, *The Great Plague: the story of London's most deadly year*. Their joint expertise, Lloyd as a historian of seventeenth-century medicine in England and France, and Dorothy as a medical biologist with an interest in plague enzootics in California, had given them a wide range of contacts, from historians and archaeologists to modern-day specialists in the plague and animal diseases. The aim of the conference was not to settle the question of the identity of plague, but to bring together many of the leading experts in the field in order to clarify the crucial issues dividing the supporters of the theory of *Yersinia pestis* from those advocating a variety of other explanations. This volume contains the revised versions of the keynote papers that were circulated in advance, along with a contribution from Dr Jankrift that raises a different problem of the continuity of the language of plague. The other communications, short comments on the main papers, have not been reprinted here, largely because they represented work that the authors themselves had recently published, and that was easily accessible elsewhere. However, some of the points that were raised will be discussed further in the Introduction, and we are grateful to the commentators for their insights.

One of the major aims of the meeting was to encourage interdisciplinarity, for it quickly became clear to the organizers that one of the problems in creating a dialogue between specialists was not, as might have been expected, that each group worked in isolation from the others, but rather the reverse. By this paradoxical formulation I mean that each group acknowledged the others' expertise and their own lack of specialist information by using the others' conclusions to validate areas where they themselves had their own hesitations about material on which they were supposedly the experts. Their expert testimony in turn removed any doubts that the others might have had about their own original conclusions to produce a circle of dangerous certainty. The frank discussion that followed the papers, part of which is summarized in the Introduction, pinpointed very clearly where the difficulties lie in seeking to understand the causes and development of plague in Medieval Europe.

The idea of bringing together specialists from a wide range of disciplines was also shared with the organizers of two other conferences. The earlier, held at the American Academy in Rome in 2001 and organized by Lester K Little, considered the so-called plague of Justinian, an earlier pandemic that lasted from 541 to 750. The revised papers of this conference, published in 2007, have added greatly to our knowledge of plague, even if, as will become clear, several of its major conclusions are challenged here. A second conference, held in Norway in 2005, included several of the participants in the Wellcome conference, but the publication of its proceedings will postdate this collection. The general thrust of both conferences confirms the message of this volume, that we need to make full and up-to-date use of the expertise of colleagues in related disciplines, and that a joint analysis of the problems involved may be a more fruitful approach than attempting to find the elusive single answer to plague and the origins of the Black Death.

As the London organizer of the conference, I must thank the Wellcome Trust Centre for its support for this initiative, and the Editors of *Medical History* for suggesting that the keynote papers might make a suitable Supplement to *Medical History*. The conference itself was run by Sally Bragg with her customary efficiency. The invited participants also contributed much to the discussion, and their perceptive comments facilitated the revision of these papers. Caroline Tonson-Rye showed admirable patience in dealing with my tardiness as editor, as well as arranging a smooth transition from manuscript to print. Thanks are also due to Janet Dudley for compiling the index.

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