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The Black Death in Iran, according to Iranian Historical Accounts from the Fourteenth through Fifteenth Centuries

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Abstract

The Black Death, as a unique historical event, has long attracted the attention of medieval and medical historians both in terms of the length of the pandemic and its geographical scope. Nevertheless, historical studies on the Black Death have often neglected the role it played in Iran. The present paper examines Iranian historical accounts of events pertaining to the pandemic in the late Middle Ages and its consequent outbreak in Iran. Its findings can open new frontiers for understanding the broad geographical area impacted by plague and, specifically, its spread in Iran. This paper attempts also to highlight the value of Iranian historical sources from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries for understanding better the outbreak of the plague.

Keywords

Black Death – Iranian historiography – disease – bubonic plague – trade

Introduction

Plague is an infectious disease caused by bacteria which can infect both humans and animals, and it is responsible for diminishing human population more than any other single cause throughout history. Early historians used the

word “plague” to refer to any epidemic illness with a large death toll.¹ Muslim writers generally use the Arabic word “*tā’un*” for “plague,” but it seems that they were unable to distinguish plague from cholera, because in many cases describing the Black Death, the term is used interchangeably with the Arabic word “*vabā’* (cholera).” Thus, Abu Bakr Qotbi Ahari (*fl.* 1360) used “*vabā’*” instead of “*tā’un*,” when referencing the outbreak of Black Death (1346–7) in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan (Kheirandish, 239).

On various occasions from the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, the bubonic plague swept through extensive parts of the world, during what is regarded as the second stage of worldwide plague. A famous story regarding the spread of the Black Death in Europe and Northern Africa is based mainly on a report by Gabriele de Mussis (c. 1280–c. 1356), an Italian notary clerk, who witnessed the event in person. He narrated a battle between the Golden Horde and Italian merchants residing in the port of Caffa in 1345. Based on his account, a huge plague swept through the Mongol army and resulted in a large death toll. After a fruitless siege of the city, Mongols threw the corpses of plague victims over the city-walls so as to infect the residents of Caffa. The Italians, in turn, left Caffa and took the disease to Mediterranean ports, and the plague thus made its way across Europe (Aberth, 13).

Despite the large number of studies on the Black Death, neither Iranian historiography nor the relapse periods of the plague in the fifteenth century have received much attention. In this study, we intend to highlight the importance of Iranian historiography for understanding the spread of the Black Death in Iran in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Iranian Sources and the Historiography of the Black Death

Historians have played a key role in passing on information about large plagues to future generations. Valuable information about the Black Death has come from historians and historiographers who more or less clarified its geographical origins. Islamic historians in particular produced remarkable reports about the origin of the Black Death.

1 Derived from the Latin *plaga*, which means “blow, stroke, wound,” plague is, in fact, a disease specific to rodents that can be transferred to human societies. Plague comes in many forms, but the best-known is the Bubonic Plague, caused by *Yersinia pestis bacterium* or *bacillus*. Fleas living in the fur of rodents spread this bacterium by infecting nearby humans. Its name comes from its discoverer Alexandre Yersin (1863–1943). He worked for the Pasteur Institute of France and during the 1894 epidemic of plague in the East Asia and Hong Kong, he discovered that plague’s spread was through contaminated rats and fleas (Magner, 157–60).

Zeyn al-Din ‘Omar Ebn al-Vardi (1292–1349), the Syrian historian, theologian, and poet, personally witnessed the outbreak of plague in Aleppo in 1349, falling victim to it himself. At the highpoint of the plague’s pandemic, he wrote *Resāla al-nabā’ ‘an al-vabā’* (“A Treatise on the Report of the Pestilence”). Yet, he merely mentions Iran’s name in his report, without elaborating on the spread of the disease there (*ibid.*, 16–7).

Maqrizi (d. 1442), in his work entitled *Ketāb al-suluk le-ma’refat doval al-moluk*, only once mentions Tabriz while elaborating on the great plague pandemic and its consequences in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. In the same text, he remarks that the plague first started in the land of Great Qa’an, which is located in the “*Eqlim-e Aval* (first clime),” a six-month journey from Tabriz (Maqrizi, IV, 81).

Furthermore, Nicephorus Gregoras (1292–1360), the Byzantine scholar and historian, gathered valuable information about the spread of the Black Death in the Greek world. In his *Byzantine History*, which covers events between 1204 and 1359, he discusses the plague epidemic in 1347 and regards the land of Scythia, located in southern Russia at the estuary of the Don River, as its place of origin. He then goes on to write about its spread into the area of the Ægean Sea and the Mediterranean (Aberth, 15).

Another first-hand account comes from Giovanni Villani (c. 1276–1348), a banker from a well-known Florentine merchant family. He, too, fell victim to the Black Death. He cites Parthia, a region between China and Turkistan, as the plague’s source of origin (Aberth, 19–20). Aberth notes that Villani is actually referring to Il-khanid Iran (*ibid.*). If that assumption is correct, Villani must have imagined the Il-khanid empire vast enough to reach the Great Khan’s Chinese territories. However, since late-medieval and renaissance historians regarded Parthians as descended from Scythians, and thus the ancestors of the Turks and Mongols,² we can deduce that Villani was referring to Mongol territory more generally and not specifically the Il-khanate.

According to other sources, the primary source of the Black Death came from somewhere in Central Asia,³ perhaps Mongolia or China. Hypotheses and speculations made by modern scientists regarding the origin of the Black Death are based largely on reports provided in earlier sources. Even though such hypotheses mention regions near Iran as potential origins of plague,

2 On this, see Meserve, 160, 220.

3 The only archaeological evidence pertaining to the Black Death was the discovery of a mass grave on the west coast of the Issyk-Kul Lake in modern Kyrgyzstan discovered in 1885 by the Russian scholar, Daniel Abramovich Chwolson (1819–1911). By investigating the tombstones of Nestorian Christian merchants, he deduced that more than a hundred of them had died during the earliest years of the Black Death (see Sussman).

they do not address Iran directly. Suspected areas of origin include regions in southern Russia and around the Black Sea coast (Benedictow, 44–50), the Yunnan province of China, steep regions of Manchuria in north-eastern China (McNeil, 142), and Kurdistan in northern Iraq (Norris).

Major contemporary studies on the Black Death fall into three categories: (i) those that seek to pinpoint its geographical origin and understand why it spread to other regions, (ii) those that study the factors influencing its outbreak in the Levant or eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, especially Egypt, and the consequences of the epidemic, (iii) and, most commonly, those that examine why and how the Black Death struck Europe and its impact. An Iranian plague epidemic falls between the cracks in all of the aforementioned categories. Indeed, most studies fail to mention Iran at all and, in the rare cases where they do, it is in reference to the plague in Azerbaijan.

There are several reasons why the Black Death in Iran has been ignored. First, Arab historians like Ebn al-Vardi and Maqrizi have been the main sources for western historians on the outbreak and spread of the Black Death in Asia and the present-day Middle East. Arab historians paid little attention to Iran due to internal unrest in the country following the downfall of the Il-khanids, which coincided with the first stages of the outbreak of the plague (1347–52).

Second, the well-known story of how Italian merchants in Crimea brought the Black Death from the port of Caffa to the entire Mediterranean has deterred researchers from investigating the probability that this disease might have had origins elsewhere, namely in Iran.

Third, Iran's territorial boundaries during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries differed from those of modern Iran. In those days, Iran's borders stretched towards the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea in the north, to the Persian Gulf in the south, to the Euphrates River in the west, and to the Indus and Oxus Rivers to the east (Imami Kho'i, 92–4). The Black Death spread to several regions within this territory, but because some of these areas are outside the boundaries of present-day Iran, Iran is ignored. In other words, to investigate more carefully the geographical expanse of the Black Death, it is necessary to consider countries' historical borders. This is the case for the hypothesis that proposes that the Black Death originated in the Kurdish areas of western Iran and northern Iraq today. In the years following the demise of the Il-khans, this area was the locus of clashes between those claiming to succeed them, as it had formed part of the territory of Il-khanid Iran. Yet, historical investigations focusing on Kurdistan make no mention of Iran.

Fourth, in European studies of the Black Death, little attention has been paid to Persian manuscripts from the period in question. The reason for this has been the relative delay in the publication of scholarly editions of these

sources in Iran when compared to Arabic ones. Also, much of Western historians' understanding of how the Black Death and other plagues spread is based on the reports of contemporary European travelogues, which give no information on the spread of plague in Iran. Similarly, later travelogues also offer little on the outbreak in Iran, reporting instead that the country's climate and geography stopped the plague's spread. Therefore, in addition to the total unfamiliarity of European researchers with some of the contemporary Persian sources that contain information on the plague, the errant claim by more recent European travelers about the lack of plague in Iran may have also affected the line of Western research.

The French traveller Jean Chardin (1643–1713), who visited Iran on several occasions during the Safavid era, wrote:

The *Persians*, hold that the *Plantane* [a tree] hath a natural Virtue in it against the Plague, and all other Infections of the Air; and they affirm, that they had no more Contagion at *Ispahan*, their Metropolis, after they had planted them every where round about, as they did in the Streets, and Gardens: Several other Towns of *Persia* are stock'd with these Trees, and particularly that of *Chiras* [Shiraz].

CHARDIN, 140

In addition, Gaspard Drouville (1783–1856), who visited Iran during the Qajar era, reported:

It can be assured that almost the whole of Persia is very healthy, exempt not only from plague and epidemic, though these scourges are prevalent amongst its neighbours, but even from little diseases or indispositions that the seasons give rise to almost everywhere [else].⁴

DROUVILLE, 41

Last and, perhaps the most important reason for Iran's underrepresentation in the historiography of the Black Death, is that only limited Iranian territories were affected by the plague during the climax of the pandemic, when it swept across Europe, North Africa, southern Russia, and the Levant from 1347 to 1352. Therefore, during that period, there was little mention of it in Iranian historical writing. In Iran, the subsequent stages of the Black Death, commonly known as recurrences, claimed more lives and brought about greater public fear, and were thus recorded in more detail in Iranian sources. Consequently,

4 We thank D Gershon Lewental for the translation.

little attention has been paid to Iranian sources and the later phases of plague in Iran.

It is worth mentioning that what we mean by writing about Western scholars' lack of attention to the plague in Iran is their unfamiliarity with reports in Iranian sources, especially about the epidemic's recurrence, that can be of great value for understanding both the disease and its consequences in Iran. This is what Dols meant when he referred to "the lack of historical information for the Black Death in most of Persia" as an "historical riddle" (179 n. 38).

Symptoms of the Black Death according to Iranian Historians

Scholars trying to research the bubonic plague often search for descriptions of the illness and its symptoms in historical sources. Iranian historical literature from the time of the Black Death provides a wealth of information about the disease's symptoms and spread. In his seventeenth-century universal history, the *Khold-e barin*, Mohammad Yusof Vāla Esfahāni writes of a plague epidemic in Herat in 1433, recounting the following anecdote: A Sufi from Herat dreams that a large group of people with dark complexion (*zangiyān*) have swarmed to Herat; the black people spit on whomever they encounter, blackening their faces, too. One of them spits on the Sufi's own face, turning it black. The next day, when the Sufi awoke, the city was struck by the plague (Vāla Esfahāni, 481). This story clearly refers to the black patches on the skin that explain the name "Black Death."

The *Matla'e sa'deyn va majma'e Bahreyn*, authored by Kamāl al-Din 'Abd al-Razzāq Samarqandi (1413–82), is a contemporary historical source that references the plague. Samarqandi describes clearly its symptoms during the Heart epidemic of 1434: "the person would suddenly succumb to headaches and severe fever, and boils the size of a chickpea or larger would appear on his body and he would pass away within a day or two" (11a, 452).⁵ He notes three major signs of the Black Death: severe headaches, the appearance of boils, and an incubation period lasting for several days that finally kills the sufferer.

While describing the Tabriz plague of 1486, Fazl-Ollāh b. Ruzbehān Khonji-Esfahāni (1455–1521) provides a precise description of the illness that tallies with the symptoms of the Black Death. Poetically, he lamented that beauties whose pretty moles once charmed their lovers, now, as a result of plague, suffered from bulging boils that dismayed all. He continued, writing that merchants who used to carry glittering gold pieces under their arms, now had

⁵ All translations from Persian, unless otherwise noted, are by the authors.

nothing more than bloody blisters, and the necks of the youth who until recently held their heads high were now spoiled by ruinous infection (Khonji-Esfahāni, 232).

A few points in Khonji-Esfahāni's poetic account demand attention. First, his mention of merchants may reflect the role of trade and commerce in the spreading the disease, a factor long suspected as one of the major causes of the Black Death pandemic. The significance of such metaphors can be more fully appreciated if one takes into account the vital role of commerce in Tabriz and its important trading routes. Another worthwhile note is his direct reference to yet another symptom of the plague—the infectious buboes in the armpits, which is a unique contemporary historical reference. This is of immense importance, as this indicates that the plagues occurring after the 1340s were also of the bubonic variety, as well. Moreover, employing a revealing imagery, Khonji-Esfahāni compares the swellings caused by the bubonic plague on the sufferers' bodies to seeds and grains; he wonders about the peculiar nature of this seed, which, unlike other seeds, which yield loads of crops, this one spoils and burns huge piles of humans (*ibid.*).

The attention given to the symptoms of plague, demonstrated through literary descriptions and metaphors, reflects the weight and meaning of the Black Death for contemporary Iranian scholars. The detailed recollection of the events surrounding the plague reveals the ominous air hanging over urban society during that era. The existence of poems referring to the Black Death is a further sign of the huge impact that the disaster had on the scholarly and cultural figures of the time. The use of poetry to comment on the plague and its impact on the society is unique among the historical literature. In this regard, one can compare these poems to those of 'Omar Ebn al-Vardi on 1346 plague in Egypt and Syria (Ebn al-Vardi, 86–93), even though his poems lack such precision in describing the disease.

Periods and Regions of Black Death Epidemics in Iran

Researchers have estimated that there were eighteen pandemic plagues in Europe between 1353 and 1500 (excluding various one-off cases in certain European cities and countries). Furthermore, Dols has estimated that, on average, a plague occurred every nine-and-a-half years in Egypt and Syria between 1348 and 1517 (Dols, 169).

No research so far has been conducted on the periods of plague epidemic in Iran during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. As such, it is necessary to detail the outbreaks of plague, as identified from historical evidence and

contemporary reports, in order to understand better its geographical scope. One can identify twenty-two cases of great plague epidemics in different parts of Iran and its surrounding territories from Iranian sources pertaining to a 152-year period, between 1342 and 1490. Based on this, it can be assumed that, on average, a plague epidemic struck Iran every seven years. The following table lists the years of major plague outbreaks along with the supporting evidence from historical sources:

Year of outbreak	Historical source
1346	<i>Mojmal-e fasihi</i> (Fasih-Kh ^v āfi, c. 1441); <i>Zeyl-e tārikh-e gozida</i> (Zeyn al-Din Mostowfi, 1391); <i>Zobdat al-tavārikh</i> (Hāfez-e Abru, c. 1427); <i>Ehyā' al-moluk</i> (Malek Shāh Hosayn, c. 1619)
1347	<i>Tārikh-e Sheykh Oveys</i> (Abu Bakr Qotbi Ahari, c. 1360)
1348	<i>al-Soluk le-ma'refat duval al-moluk</i> (Maqrizi, c. 1442)
1360	<i>Mojmal-e fasihi</i>
1361	<i>Zobdat al-tavārikh</i>
1369	<i>Mojmal-e fasihi</i> ; <i>Zeyl-e tārikh-e gozida</i>
1382	<i>Matla' e sa'deyn va majma' e Bahreyn</i> (Samarqandi, c. 1482)
1406	<i>Zobdat al-tavārikh</i>
1407	<i>Zobdat al-tavārikh</i> ; <i>Matla' e sa'deyn va majma' e Bahreyn</i>
1433	<i>Khold-e barin</i> (Vāla Esfahāni, c. 1693)
1434	<i>Habib al-siyār</i> (Kh ^v ānd-amīr, 1521); <i>Matla' e sa'deyn va majma' e Bahreyn</i> ; <i>Rowzāt al-jannāt fi owsāf-e madinat-e Herāt</i> (Esfazāri, 1491–3)
1435	<i>Tadhkera-ye majāles al-nafā'es</i> (Navā'i, 1491–2)
1462	<i>Rowzāt al-jannāt fi owsāf-e madinat-e Herāt</i>
1486	<i>Tārikh-e Ālam-ārā-ye Amīni</i> (Khonji-Esfahāni, c. 1491)

FIGURE 1 Outbreak of plague, according to Iranian sources, 1346–1486

In addition to the above-mentioned cases, plague outbreaks were recorded in certain parts of Iran in 1410, 1416, 1431, and 1437. Based on this evidence, the highest frequencies of epidemics during the period in question could be found in Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Baghdad, Samarqand, Herat, the Caspian Sea coast, and, less so, in Isfahan and Sistan. However, it should not be assumed that this list reflects certain environmental or ecological factors. Information on the disease in these specific areas could simply represent a lack of knowledge about other locations. It goes without saying that the affairs and events of minor towns and remote places would rarely be recorded in historical reports; news of incidents in such places either would not reach the court scribes or would appear to them as matters of little importance. However, an examination

of the available sites does present the intriguing argument that the plague infected mostly the populous cities located close to major trading routes used by merchant caravans, especially Iranian capital cities.

Azerbaijan and its center of Tabriz had served as Iran's capital city since the foundation of the Il-khanate in 1258 and it remained a sought-after seat for local governments in the years following the collapse of Il-khanid control, especially during the climax of the Black Death. In the aftermath of Timurid rule, Tabriz again became the capital city for first the Qara Qoyunlu and then the Aq Qoyunlu Turkmen states (1378–1502). Samarqand and Herat, in turn, were Timurid centers (1370–1506) and reports of plague outbreak in these cities, especially in 1426 and 1427 in Herat, are among the major events of the period.

Moreover, the cities and regions of Samarqand, Herat, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Baghdad were close to the global focal points of the Black Death pandemic. The aforementioned hypotheses cited Central Asia, southern Russia, or Kurdistan as the place of origin of the Black Death. Samarqand and Herat are near or part of Central Asia, southern Russia is near Azerbaijan, and Kurdistan is close to Baghdad.

Iran during the Black Death Pandemic (late Fourteenth Century)

The first fifty-year period of plague epidemics in Iran coincided with the global outbreak of the Black Death. Even though researchers are divided over the precise start of the pandemic,⁶ all historical reports indicate that plague had spread to regions near Iran in 1346. Iranian sources are unanimous about an outbreak—which was commonly called the “Great Cholera (*vabāʿ-e ʿazim*)”—in Azerbaijan that year. This seems logical given the proximity of Azerbaijan to the Black Sea, the area from which the Black Death spread to Europe and the Middle East based on the famous story of the Italian merchants in Crimea.

Ahari is among the first to record the disease in Azerbaijan in his *Tārīkh-e Sheykh Oveys*, which covers the events and developments of the last years of Il-khanid rule. Aside from observing the viciousness and violence of Malek Ashraf Chupāni (r. 1343–57) in Azerbaijan in 1346–7, he records “that year, a great cholera (*vabāʿ-e ʿazim*) had taken over Azerbaijan. Three things were

6 As noted above, the discovery of a mass grave belonging to plague victims in the Issyk-Kul Lake in Kyrgyzstan shows that many were buried in 1338–9; this correlates with information from Muslim writers like Ebn al-Vardi, who wrote in 1347 of the start of a plague epidemic fifteen years prior in the “Land of Darkness,” referring to remote regions of Central Asia and Russia. However, some scholars consider the span of fifteen years impossibly long for the spread of the plague from China and Central Asia to the Black Sea region; see Byrne, 49.

abundant: oppression (*zolm*), high prices (*garāni*), and cholera (*vabā'*)" (Kheirandish, 239).

This is not the only time that Ahari mentions the plague. However, Zeyn al-Din (d. c. 1400), the son of the Il-khanid bureaucrat and historian Hamd-Ollāh Mostowfi Qazvini (1281–c. 1344), the great bureaucrat and historian of the Il-khanid period, provides more information about this incident in *Zeyl-e tārikh-e gozida* (1391), which continues his father's *Tārikh-e gozida* (1330):

There was a great cholera epidemic in 1346 in Tabriz; Malek Ashraf's cruelty had reached its peak and most people abandoned their homes and city. Fearing cholera, Malek Ashraf left the city and stayed near Ahar, and left for Qarābāgh when the winter came so as to make his way toward Shirvān.

ZEYN AL-DIN MOSTOWFI, 41

This report suggests that the plague in Tabriz prompted the flight of its population, along with the Chupānid ruler himself. The consequences of the epidemic and the resultant demographic decline can be observed in change of Tabriz's economic situation during those years. A decade earlier, Tabriz had been Iran's largest city and the most prosperous trading center in the East. Odoric of Pordenone (1286–1331), the first Western traveller since Marco Polo to reach the area, visiting various Asian cities as a Franciscan missionary in 1318, some thirty years before the Black Death, describes the wealth and economic prosperity in Tabriz:

This city is, for traffic of merchandise, said to be the chief city of the world. There is no kind of provision, nor anything else belonging to merchandise, which is not to be had there in great abundance. This city stands very well situated, for to it all the nations of the whole world may resort for traffic. Concerning this city, the Christians in those parts are of opinion that the Persian emperor receives more tribute out of it than the king of France out of all his dominions.

ODORIC OF PORDENONE, 214

Tabriz remained one of the main centers for trade and commerce in the East until the arrival of the Black Death. But in the 1340s, during the epidemic, the level of commerce plummeted. Foreign merchants could not be seen in the city and even though Malek Ashraf dispatched an ambassador to Genoa in the hopes of improving economic relations, his efforts yielded little result ('Own-Ollāhi, 77). At the same time, the political crisis that followed the

collapse of Il-khanid rule certainly also played a role in the chaos, disarray, and decline of commerce.

Sources indicate that the plague spread to Baghdad via Malek Ashraf's army. Arab historians speak of many deaths among his soldiers during his campaign against Baghdad in 1348. Maqrizi writes that, although his men retreated, the plague spread to Aleppo and the Eastern Mediterranean (Maqrizi, IV, 82).

In addition to Azerbaijan, the northern coast of Iran and the province of Sistan were also impacted by the epidemic in the 1340s. The description of an outbreak of cholera in Āmol in 1349 must in fact refer to the great plague:

Not long after the year 743/1342–3 cholera broke out at Āmul, and many of the house of Bāwand and the wife and children of Fakhru'd-Dawla Ḥasan died of the disease, so that he with two of his sons alone remained. In 750/1349–50 the disease broke out again and all those of the house of Bāwand who were at Āmul were wiped out, whilst of the Chulāwís only Kiyá Afrásiyáb and his sons were left.

RABINO, 35

In addition, Malek Shāh Hoseyn (1571–c. 1625), in his *Ehyā' al-muluk*, wrote that Sistan in 1346 was struck by both a great famine and a cholera epidemic, from which the people of Sistan suffered for a year to the extent that Qotb al-Din Mohammad, the ruler of the region, fell victim to it (94).

While the plague subsided in Azerbaijan and the Black Sea coastal regions from 1346 to 1349, it continued to spread across Europe, infecting the entire continent by 1352. Nevertheless, certain parts of Iran, as well as places in the eastern Mediterranean and Europe, experienced recurrences of the Black Death on several other occasions through the early fifteenth century.

Recurrences of the Black Death in Iran until the End of the Fifteenth Century

Iranian historical sources have provided notable reports on recurrent plague epidemics in major cities, especially government centres, which can aid scholars of the Black Death to gain a better understanding of the epidemic following its initial outburst in the 1340s.

Between 1360 and 1362, the plague once more hit Azerbaijan and its surrounding regions, as far as the Caucasus and the Black Sea. The Timurid-era historian, Hāfez-e Abru, speaks of a plague in Azerbaijan and Arrān, writing that Soltān Sheykh Oveys (r. 1356–74), scared of the disease, fled to the countryside

(I, 323). Certain areas of Transoxiana, such as Samarqand, also succumbed to the plague at this time. During the Sarbadārid uprising, the epidemic caused the destruction of the Mongol army led by Mowlānā Zada Bokhāri that was attacking Samarqand (*ibid.*).

A few years later, in 1369/70, a major plague swept through Tabriz. Based on reports from the *Zeyl-e tārikh-e gozida*, during that autumn, the entire city was affected and around three hundred thousand people died. Nevertheless, Zeyn al-Din goes on to say that, such was Tabriz's prosperity and population that, despite the large death toll, its effect was barely felt on the city (Zeyn al-Din Mostowfi, 41).

Mohammad Kāzem Tabrizi (known as "Asrār," d. 1897) reflected in his *Manzar al-Owliyā* (1887) on a prophecy made by Sheykh 'Abd al-Samad (d. 1361), a noted mystic and shaikh from Tabriz, about the plague of 1369/70. The shaikh warned people of a devastating death and when queried about the time of its occurrence, he replied that the calamity would strike nine years following his own passing. He passed away in the plague of 1361, while another plague attacked the city in 1369. According to Asrār, the number of fatalities was so high that the city's cemetery could not accommodate the number of corpses (163–4).

Again, in 1382, at the same time that Timur-e Lang attacked the northern regions of Iran, plague struck those areas, especially Māzandarān, resulting in the deaths of many. Timurid historians interpreted this as divine punishment for the people's opposition and animosity towards Timur (Samarqandi, Ib, 536).

In 1406/7, Azerbaijan again, along with other regions in Iran, experienced an outbreak of the plague. Hāfez-e Abru speaks of an epidemic that year in Tabriz; apparently, it also reached Isfahan, taking so many lives that nobody was left to harvest its crops and simply hearing the name "Isfahan" infused people with immense sadness (III, 165). During this period, which coincided with Timurid rule, plague infected not only Iran, but also some neighboring countries. Arab historians mention that it resulted in the loss of many lives in Baghdad, Damascus, Palestine, and nearby areas from 1410 to 1411 (Ebn Hajar 'Asqalani, II, 463, 466, 482). Apparently, this wave swept through different parts of the region in the ensuing years; Isfahan and Cairo are among the major cities that fell victim to plague in 1416, leading to widespread deaths. In Isfahan, the disease significantly reduced the city's population (*ibid.*, III, 87). Again, there are reports of the plague between 1429 and 1431 and it is said to have expanded to Tabriz and Baghdad (*ibid.*, III, 481).

However, a serious recurrence of the bubonic plague took place from 1433 to 1435, coinciding with the Timurid ruler Shāh-Rokh (r. 1405–47). During his

reign over much of Iran and Central Asia, the capital moved from Samarqand to Herat, which became one of the most prosperous cities of the time. A number of Timurid historians described Herat's grandeur and magnificence in this period (Samarqandi, 11a, 12; Esfazāri, 1, 19). Evidences relating to the Black Death and its effect can also be found in contemporary sources. Samarqandi, who was twenty-two years old during the great epidemic of 1434, writes that Herat, although famous for having a clean climate and having never experienced cholera or the plague, was struck that year by an epidemic beyond any description. As noted above, his reports are invaluable for enabling us to identify the type of plague that affected the city. According to him, some parts of the city were more impacted than others and Samarqandi estimates that around ten thousand people died in Herat and its environs on a single day and that four thousand seven hundred coffins were carried out the city's gates on a single occasion—in addition to the dead who were dumped in ditches inside and outside the city by mules (11a, 452). He emphasizes that one can hardly exaggerate the number of casualties and goes on to list prominent figures who succumbed to the plague, further indicating the scale of devastation (11a, 452–5).

Mo'in al-Din Mohammad Zamji Esfazāri (*fl.* 1490s) also describes this incident in his *Rowzāt al-jannāt fi owsāf-e madinat-e Herāt* (1491–3), stating that the epidemic lasted for four months and eight days. He records a mass flight of people and notes that Shāh-Rokh, who was near Rayy at the time, forbade his authorities from opening any letter from Khorasan so as to prevent people from learning about the plague and being horrified (11, 92–3). Esfazāri provides some statistics regarding the casualties in Herat and nearby cities, writing that, in Herat, six hundred thousand corpses were buried in proper graves, while another four hundred thousand were buried in the countryside. He thus records a total of a million burials, in addition to the large number of corpses that were simply abandoned in ditches (94).

Reports from other writers suggest that Herat was not alone during this period and that large swathes of Iran and the Middle East were affected from 1433 to 1435. 'Ali-Shir Navā'i (1441–1501), the prominent Timurid vizier under Hoseyn Bāyqarā (*r.* 1470–1506), mentions one of the major contemporary poets Mowlānā Kātebi (d. 1435) in his *tadhkera*. According to his account, Mowlānā Kātebi, on his deathbed in 1435, composed a poem about the plague in Astarābād (modern Gorgān). His poem relates that Astarābād used to have a sweet-smelling soil, but now, due to plague, it has turned into a ruinous place and all its inhabitants, young and elderly alike, have died, like a fire that has devoured a forest (Navā'i, 10–11). Accounts from Arab historians indicate that, at this time, an epidemic also reached Iraq, especially near the Euphrates River, and that it spread onwards to Europe (Maqrizi, VII, 352).

In 1461, the plague once more hit Herat. Samarqandi writes that it killed people like a fire consuming haystacks, to the extent that no passers-by remained in the streets and many people fled (11b, 910). In addition, Esfazāri speaks of an epidemic in Transoxiana, especially Samarqand, and describes its death toll as indescribable (IIa, 264).

The final years of the plague and its recurrences in the fifteenth century in Iran refer mostly to a major epidemic from 1486 to 1490 in Azerbaijan, especially Tabriz; this wave also spread to nearby regions. Since 1378, the western parts of Iran, especially Azerbaijan, had been under Qara Qoyunlu and, later, Aq Qoyunlu Turkmen rule. The plague of the late 1480s coincided with the reign of the Aq Qoyunlu ruler Ya‘qub (r. 1478–90). Khonji-Esfahāni, in a chapter entitled “Mentioning of the merry spring and the emergence of the plague in Tabriz,” describes the disease as a plunderer destroying the lives of the people. In one of his poems, he also calls the period, “the days of plague” (Khonji-Esfahāni, 232–3). Based on his account, it is evident that the plague continued its rampage throughout the year, causing both military forces and civilians alike flee to surrounding areas, lest they succumb to the disease (*ibid.*, 233).

The Safavid historian, Yahyā b. ‘Abd al-Latif Hoseyni Qazvini, *Lobb al-tavārikh* (d. 1552/3), who was obviously hostile towards the Aq Qoyunlu dynasty, recounted its cruelty and describes the outbreak of plague as a punishment for their injustice and brutality. He notes that the epidemic took many lives and led to wide-scale flight (Qazvini, 261).

Conclusion

An examination of various Iranian historical sources indicates that, like many other places during the Middle Ages, Iran experienced the Black Death and grappled with its recurrences. Iranian accounts can provide valuable information on the pandemic; our findings demonstrate not only their usefulness for understanding how the great plague spread in Iran and its neighboring areas during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but they can also help scholars with identifying the nature and type of the plague. Clearly, there is a need to pay more attention to such sources, which have thus far been largely absent in the historiographical study of the Black Death, and further investigation and research is required. Given that several of the historical annals examined include poetry describing the Black Death and its human death toll, it is possible that a careful reading of the work of contemporary poets, some of whom are little-known or obscure, may yield even more detailed information on the Black Death and its spread in Iran.

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