

Item, this testator leaves . . . as above to Nicholas, his illegitimate son, 30 *florins*. . . .

Item, this testator leaves . . . to Udelecta, another illegitimate daughter, 30 *florins*. . . .

Item, this testator leaves . . . as above to Marietta, another illegitimate daughter, 30 *florins*. . . .

Item, in regard to all other property, movables, real estate, salaries and credits of any sort, he institutes, wants, and demands that Renoardus,* the above-stated nephew, be his universal heir, demanding and ordering that the above Renoardus, his nephew and heir, be held to enact and to initiate and maintain all of the above-stated legacies, . . . and this the above-stated testator asserts to be his last will, which he wishes to be valued and held by the right of an oral testament.

*This is Renciardo Jannis, Libertus's nephew and executor, mentioned above.

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°IMĀD AL-DĪN ABŪ 'L-FIDĀ' ISMĀ'ĪL
B. °UMAR IBN KATHĪR

The Beginning and End: On History

ca. 1350-1351

The following selection is by 'Imād al-Dīn Abū 'l-Fidā' Ismā'īl b. 'Umar Ibn Kathīr, who was born in Syria in 1300. Ibn Kathīr was in a good position to observe the religious effects of the plague in Damascus; in February 1348, just a few months before the Black Death arrived, he was appointed teacher of the hadith, or religious traditions relating to Muhammad, at one of the city's religious schools. This excerpt comes from Kathīr's al-Bidāya wa-'l-nihāya fī'l-tārīkh (The Beginning and End: On History), at the end of which is a chronicle of Damascus. Ibn Kathīr died in February 1374.

Gaston Wiet, "La Grande Peste Noire en Syrie et en Égypte," *Études d'Orientalisme dédiées à la mémoire de Lévi-Provençal*, 2 vols. (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962), 1:381-83.

At Damascus, a reading of the *Traditions* of Bukhārī* took place on June 5 of this year [1348] after the public prayer—with the great magistrates there assisting, in the presence of a very dense crowd—the ceremony continued with a recitation of a section of the Koran, and the people poured out their supplications that the city be spared the plague. Indeed, the population of Damascus had learned that the epidemic extended over the [Syrian] littoral and various points of the province, so that it was predicted and feared that it would become a menace to Damascus, and several inhabitants of the city had already been victims of the disease. On the morning of June 7, the crowd reassembled before the *mihrab*[†] of the Companions of the Prophet, and it resumed the recitation of the flood of Noah, of which a reading was made 3,363 times, in accordance with the counsel of a man to whom the Prophet had appeared in song and had suggested this prayer.[‡] During this month [of June], the mortality increased among the population of Damascus, until it reached a daily average of more than 100 persons. . . .

On Monday, July 21, a proclamation made in the city invited the population to fast for three days; they were further asked to go on the fourth day, a Friday, to the Mosque of the Foot in order to humbly beseech God to take away this plague. Most of the Damascenes fasted, several passed the night in the mosque indulging in acts of devotion, conforming to the ritual of the month of Ramadan.[§] On the morning of July 25, the inhabitants threw themselves [into these ceremonies] at every opportunity from “every precipitous passage”:||

*Al-Bukhārī was a famous collector of Islamic traditions who lived in the ninth century. The work being read from is undoubtedly al-Bukhārī's *Sahih*, a collection of more than 7,000 traditions on a variety of subjects, including the creation, heaven and hell, and the Prophet Muhammad. According to al-Maqrīzī, the reading took place at the Omayyad Mosque and lasted three days and nights.

[†]*mihrab*: An arched niche used for prayer, which pointed in the direction of Mecca.

[‡]More details of this story are given by al-Maqrīzī, according to whom the holy man came “from the mountains of Asia Minor” and first communicated his vision to the great *qadi*, or judge, of Damascus. His instructions were to “read 3,360 times the flood of Noah and ask God to end this plague that afflicts you.” Al-Maqrīzī reports that the Damascenes carried out the holy man's instructions “in a perfect spirit of humility and with an intense repentance of their past sins”; they also allegedly sacrificed a “great number” of sheep and cattle, whose meat was distributed to the poor. After this went on for a week, al-Maqrīzī claims, the plague began to “diminish daily” before disappearing from Damascus entirely. This conflicts with Kathīr's testimony.

[§]One of the five pillars of Islam, fasting during the sacred month of Ramadan is prescribed by the Koran and usually takes place in November.

||This seems to be a quotation from Koran 22:27: “And proclaim the Pilgrimage among men: They will come to thee on foot and [mounted] on every kind of camel, lean on account of journeys through deep and distant mountain highways.” The twenty-second *sura*, or chapter, is on pilgrimage, so this is Kathīr's way of saying that the Damascenes embarked on a plague procession.

One saw in this multitude Jews, Christians, Samaritans, old men, old women, young children, poor men, emirs, notables, magistrates, who processed after the morning prayer, not ceasing to chant their prayers until daybreak. That was a memorable ceremony. . . .

On Monday, October 5, after the call to afternoon prayer, a violent storm broke over Damascus and its environs, stirring up a very thick cloud of dust. The atmosphere became yellowish, then black and was totally dark. The population was in a state of anguish for about a quarter of an hour, imploring God, asking His pardon and lamenting all the more that it was afflicted by this cruel mortality. Others imagined that this cataclysm marked the end of their misfortunes, but they did not dwell too much on this. Indeed, the number of cadavers brought to the Omayyad Mosque exceeded the figure of 150, without including the dead in the suburbs, and the non-Muslim dead. Now, in the environs of the capital, the dead were innumerable, a thousand in a few days.

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ABŪ HAFS °UMAR IBN AL-WARDĪ

Essay on the Report of the Pestilence

ca. 1348

In this selection, Ibn al-Wardī of Aleppo, Syria, provides a classic account of the Muslim religious view of the plague, largely derived from the Koran and the hadith, or traditions ascribed to the prophet Muhammad. As in the previous selection of his (Document 2), al-Wardī inserts poetic verses as a memory aid.

This plague is for the Muslims a martyrdom and a reward, and for the disbelievers a punishment and a rebuke. When the Muslim endures

Michael W. Dols, "Ibn al-Wardī's *Risālah al-naba' 'an al-waba'*, A Translation of a Major Source for the History of the Black Death in the Middle East" in *Near Eastern Numismatics, Iconography, Epigraphy and History: Studies in Honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran K. Kouymjian (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1974), 454-55.

misfortune, then patience is his worship. It has been established by our Prophet, God bless him and give him peace, that the plague-stricken are martyrs. This noble tradition is true and assures martyrdom. And this secret should be pleasing to the true believer. If someone says it causes infection and destruction, say: God creates and recreates. If the liar disputes the matter of infection and tries to find an explanation, I say that the Prophet, on him be peace, said: who infected the first? If we acknowledge the plague's devastation of the people, it is the will of the Chosen Doer. So it happened again and again.

I take refuge in God from the yoke of the plague. Its high explosion has burst into all countries and was an examiner of astonishing things. Its sudden attacks perplex the people. The plague chases the screaming without pity and does not accept a treasure for ransom. Its engine is far-reaching. The plague enters into the house and swears it will not leave except with all of its inhabitants: "I have an order from the *qadi* [religious judge] to arrest all those in the house." Among the benefits of this order is the removal of one's hopes and the improvement of his earthly works. It awakens men from their indifference for the provisioning of their final journey.

One man begs another to take care of his children, and one says
goodbye to his neighbors.

A third perfects his works, and another prepares his shroud.

A fifth is reconciled with his enemies, and another treats his friends
with kindness.

One is very generous; another makes friends with those who have
betrayed him.

Another man puts aside his property; one frees his servants.*

One man changes his character while another mends his ways.

For this plague has captured all people and is about to send its
ultimate destruction.

There is no protection today from it other than His mercy, praise be
to God.

Nothing prevented us from running away from the plague except our devotion to noble tradition. Come then, seek the aid of God Almighty for raising the plague, for He is the best helper. Oh God, we call You better than anyone did before. We call You to raise from us the pestilence and plague. We do not take refuge in its removal other than with You. We do not depend on our good health against the

*Slavery was common in the Muslim world.

plague but on You. We seek Your protection, oh Lord of creation, from the blows of this stick. We ask for Your mercy which is wider than our sins even as they are the number of the sands and pebbles. We plead with You, by the most honored of the advocates, Muhammad, the Prophet of mercy, that You take away from us this distress. Protect us from the evil and the torture and preserve us. For You are our sole support; what a perfect trustee!

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LISĀN AL-DĪN IBN AL-KHATĪB

A Very Useful Inquiry into the Horrible Sickness

1349-1352

A Muslim scholar and physician, Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khatīb hailed from Loja, a town near Granada, the capital city of an important and tenacious Moorish kingdom in southern Spain. A friend of Ibn Khatīma, Ibn al-Khatīb wrote his own medical account of the plague, entitled Muqni'at as-sā'il 'an al-marad al-hā'il (A Very Useful Inquiry into the Horrible Sickness). Since he incorporated Ibn Battūta's famous description of the plague in Southeast Asia, al-Khatīb likely wrote his treatise during his friend's visit to Granada between 1349 and 1352. In this selection, al-Khatīb explains why he rejects the Islamic religious proscription against plague contagion, which was well documented by physicians. His outspokenness against a long-established hadith, or religious tradition, backed up by the Shari'a, or Muslim law, was perhaps triggered by the fact that his friend, Khātīma, felt compelled to bow to Islamic precept despite empirical observation on the same subject in his own treatise (Document 13). Al-Khatīb's brave defense of contagion may have contributed to his forced exile from Granada in 1371, when proceedings began for his trial for heresy on the basis of his writings. Before the trial could begin, however, a mob broke into his prison at Fez and lynched him in 1374.

M. J. Müller, "Ibnul-khatīb's Bericht über die Pest," *Sitzungsberichte der Königl. Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 2 (1863): 2-12. Translated from the Arabic with assistance from Walid Saleh.

If it were asked, how do we submit to the theory of contagion, when already the divine law has refuted the notion of contagion, we will answer: The existence of contagion has been proved by experience, deduction, the senses, observation, and by unanimous reports, and these aforementioned categories are the demonstrations of proof. And it is not a secret to whoever has looked into this matter or has come to be aware of it that those who come into contact with [plague] patients mostly die, while those who do not come into contact survive. Moreover, disease occurs in a household or neighborhood because of the mere presence of a contagious dress or utensil; even a [contaminated] earring has been known to kill whoever wears it and his whole household. And when it happens in a city, it starts in one house and then affects the visitors of the house, then the neighbors, the relatives, and other visitors until it spreads throughout the city. And coastal cities are free of the disease until it comes from the sea through a visitor from another city that has the disease, and thus the appearance of the disease in the safe city coincides with the arrival of this man from the contagious city. And the safety of those who have gone into isolation is demonstrated by the example of the ascetic, Ibn Abū Madyan, who lived in the city of Salé [unidentified]. He believed in contagion, and so he hoarded food and bricked up the door on his family (and his family was large!), and the city was obliterated by the plague and not one soul [except Madyan] was left in that whole town. And reports were unanimous that isolated places that have no roads to them and are not frequented by people have escaped unscathed from the plague. And let me tell you of the miraculous survival in our time of the Muslim prisoners who were spared in the prison of the city of Seville, and they were in the thousands. They were not struck by the bubonic plague, yet it almost obliterated the city. And it has been confirmed that nomads and tent dwellers in Africa and other nomadic places have escaped unscathed because their air is not enclosed and it is improbable that it can be corrupted.

And amidst the horrible afflictions that the plague has imposed upon the people, God has afflicted the people with some learned religious scholars who issue *fatwas** [against fleeing the plague], so that the quills with which the scholars wrote these *fatwas* were like swords upon which the Muslims died. . . . Although the intent of the divine

**fatwa*: A ruling or an opinion based on Islamic law handed down by a qualified legal scholar.

law is innocent of harm, when a prophetic statement is contradicted by the senses and observation, it is incumbent upon us to interpret it in a way so that the *hadith* fits reality, even if we claim to subscribe to the literal meaning of the *hadith* and, lest we forget, to the fundamentals of the *Shari'a* [Islamic law] that everybody knows about. And the truth of this matter is that it should be interpreted in accordance with those who affirm the theory of contagion. Moreover, there are in the divine law many indications that support the theory of contagion, such as the statement of Muhammad: "A disease should not visit a healthy man," or the statement that: "One escapes the fate of God to meet the fate of God." But this is not the place to go on at length concerning this matter, because the discussion about whether the divine law agrees or disagrees with the contagion theory is not the business of the medical art, but is incidental to it. And in conclusion, to ignore the proofs for plague contagion is an indecency and an affront to God and holds cheap the lives of Muslims. And some of the learned holy men have retracted their *fatwas* for fear of helping people to their deaths.

May God keep us from committing error in word and deed!