

Lesson 2***Student Handout 2.3*****Ibn Khaldun:
An Altered World**

“At the present time—that is, at the end of the eighth century [A.H., which is the fourteenth century C. E.]—the situation in the Maghrib [North Africa], as we can observe, has taken a turn and changed entirely. The Berbers, the original population of the Maghrib, have been replaced by an influx of Arabs (that began in) the fifth [eleventh] century. The Arabs outnumbered and overpowered the Berbers, stripped them of most of their lands, and (also) obtained a share of those that remained in their possession. This was the situation until, in the middle of the eighth [fourteenth] century, civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to (the East’s more affluent) civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it. When there is a general change of conditions, it is as if the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were a new and repeated creation, a world brought into existence anew. . . .”

From Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1967), 1:64-65.

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.4

The Catastrophe of the 14th Century

Ibn Battuta is celebrated as the greatest traveler of medieval times. A native Moroccan, he journeyed to Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Persia, Iraq, East Africa, Anatolia, Russia, India, and China. In this excerpt from *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta*, Ross E. Dunn describes Ibn Battuta's brush with the greatest catastrophe of the fourteenth century.

“While Ibn Battuta was enjoying the company of the *‘ulama* [scholars] of Aleppo [in Syria] in June 1348, travelers reaching the city from the south reported that a virulent disease had been raging at Gaza on the Egyptian frontier and that more than a thousand people had been dying from it every day. Buboes, or inflamed swellings, appeared in the groin, armpits, or neck of the afflicted, and this irruption was typically accompanied by nausea, pain in the head, stomach, and limbs, insomnia, and delirium. If a victim began to spit blood and experience pneumonic symptoms, he usually died within hours.

Amid rumors of this lethal darkness advancing into Syria, Ibn Battuta decided to return south. He got as far as the town of Homs when he suddenly found himself engulfed in the epidemic, 300 people dying the day he arrived there. Continuing on to Damascus, he reached the great oasis in July to find that the plague had already struck. The death toll had risen to 2,000 a day, the population was reeling in shock, and the mundane routines of the city had come to a halt.

The people fasted for three successive days, the last of which was a Thursday. At the end of this period, the *amirs* [commanders], *sharifs* [descendants of the Prophet Muhammad], *qadis* [judges], doctors of the Law, and all other classes of people in their several degrees, assembled in the Great mosque, until it was filled to overflowing with them, and spent Thursday night there in prayers and liturgies and supplications. Then, after performing the dawn prayer..., they all went out together on foot carrying Korans in their hands—the *amirs* too barefooted. The entire population of the city joined in the exodus, male and female, small and large, the Jews went out with their book of the law and the Christians with their Gospel, their women and children with them; the whole concourse of them in tears and humble supplications, imploring the favor of God through His Books and His Prophets.

At the same time Ibn Battuta had been sailing westward from China to his expectant reunion with the Islamic heartland, so the Black Death, the greatest pandemic disaster since the sixth century, was making its terrible way across the Central Asian grasslands to the shores of the Black Sea. Plague was endemic among ground-burrowing rodent populations of the Inner Asian steppe. It was transmitted from animals to humans by the bite of a common species of flea. Hatching and living in the fur of plague-afflicted rats, infected fleas found their way to sacks of grain and other foodstuffs or to clothing. The plague appears to have started among pastoral folk

of East Central Asia, spreading outward from there along the trade routes both southwest and west, beginning about 1331. Lurking among the merchandise in commercial wagon trains or the storerooms of caravansaries, fleas carried the bacillus *Yersinia pestis* to the blood streams of humans. . . . As the pestilence broke out in one oasis or *khan* after another, survivors hurried onto the next place along the trail, thereby unwittingly carrying the disease throughout the commercial network of the steppe. The same Mongol law and order that made possible a century of intense human interchange between China and the Atlantic coast now quickened the progress of the plague bacillus across Eurasia.

In the calamitous year of 1348 ships of death coursed westward throughout the Mediterranean basin, inflicting their grim lading on one port after another. From the ports, mule trains and camel caravans transmitted the disease to the interior regions of Europe, northern Africa, and the Middle East. . . . By the end of 1350, when the first assault of the disease was playing itself out, Europe may have lost as much as one-third of its population. Mortality rates in the Islamic lands were probably comparable.”

From Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the 14th Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.5

The Florentine Chronicle

Marchione di Coppo Stefani was born in Florence in 1336. He wrote the Florentine Chronicle in the 1370s and 1380s. It includes a section titled “Concerning A Mortality In The City Of Florence In Which Many People Died.”

“In the year of the Lord 1348 there was a very great pestilence in the city and district of Florence. It was of such a fury and so tempestuous that in houses in which it took hold previously healthy servants who took care of the ill died of the same illness. Almost none of the ill survived past the fourth day. Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another. Those in town fled to villages. Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted vast sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. They inspected the urine from a distance and with something odoriferous under their nose. Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial. And those who died had neither confessor nor other sacraments. And many died with no one looking after them. And many died of hunger because when someone took to bed sick, another in the house, terrified, said to him: “I’m going for the doctor.” Calmly walking out the door, the other left and did not return again. Abandoned by people, without food, but accompanied by fever, they weakened. There were many who pleaded with their relatives not to abandon them when night fell. But [the relatives] said to the sick person, “So that during the night you did not have to awaken those who serve you and who work hard day and night, take some sweetmeats, wine or water. They are here on the bedstead by your head; here are some blankets.” And when the sick person had fallen asleep, they left and did not return. If it happened that he was strengthened by the food during the night he might be alive and strong enough to get to the window. If the street was not a major one, he might stand there a half hour before anyone came by. And if someone did pass by, and if he was strong enough that he could be heard when he called out to them, sometimes there might be a response and sometimes not, but there was no help. No one, or few, wished to enter a house where anyone was sick, nor did they even want to deal with those healthy people who came out of a sick person’s house. And they said to them: “He is stupefied, do not speak to him!” saying further: “He has it because there is a bubo in his

house.” They call the swelling a bubo. Many died unseen. So they remained in their beds until they stank. And the neighbors, if there were any, having smelled the stench, placed them in a shroud and sent them for burial. The house remained open and yet there was no one daring enough to touch anything because it seemed that things remained poisoned and that whoever used them picked up the illness.

At every church, or at most of them, they dug deep trenches, down to the waterline, wide and deep, depending on how large the parish was. And those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch, or else they paid a high price to those who would do it for them. The next morning, if there were many [bodies] in the trench, they covered them over with dirt. And then more bodies were put on top of them, with a little more dirt over those; they put layer on layer just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna.

The beccamorti [literally vultures] who provided their service, were paid such a high price that many were enriched by it. Many died from [carrying away the dead], some rich, some after earning just a little, but high prices continued. Servants, or those who took care of the ill, charged from one to three florins per day and the cost of things grew. The things that the sick ate, sweetmeats and sugar, seemed priceless. . . . Finding wax was miraculous. A pound of wax would have gone up more than a florin if there had not been a stop put [by the communal government] to the vain ostentation that the Florentines always make [over funerals]. Thus it was ordered that no more than two large candles could be carried [in any funeral]. Churches had no more than a single bier which usually was not sufficient. Spice dealers and beccamorti sold biers, burial palls, and cushions at very high prices. Dressing in expensive woolen cloth as is customary in [mourning] the dead, that is in a long cloak, with mantle and veil that used to cost women three florins climbed in price to thirty florins and would have climbed to 100 florins had the custom of dressing in expensive cloth not been changed. The rich dressed in modest wools, those not rich sewed [clothes] in linen. Benches on which the dead were placed cost like the heavens and still the benches were only a hundredth of those needed. Priests were not able to ring bells as they would have liked. Concerning that [the government] issued ordinances discouraging the sounding of bells, sale of burial benches, and limiting expenses. They could not sound bells, sell benches, nor cry out announcements because the sick hated to hear of this and it discouraged the healthy as well. Priests and friars went [to serve] the rich in great multitudes and they were paid such high prices that they all got rich. And therefore [the authorities] ordered that one could not have more than a prescribed number [of clerics] of the local parish church. And the prescribed number of friars was six. . . . This [pestilence] was a matter of such great discouragement and fear that men gathered together in order to take some comfort in dining together. And each evening one of them provided dinner to ten companions and the next evening they planned to eat with one of the others. And sometimes if they planned to eat with a certain one he had no meal prepared because he was sick. Or if the host had made dinner for the ten, two or three were missing. Some fled to villas, others to villages in order to get a change of air. Where there had been no [pestilence], there they carried it; if it was already there, they caused it to increase. None of the guilds in Florence was working. All the shops were shut, taverns closed; only the apothecaries and the churches remained open. If you went outside, you found almost no one... This mortality enriched apothecaries, doctors, poultry vendors, beccamorti, and

greengrocers who sold of poultices of mallow, nettles, mercury and other herbs necessary to draw off the infirmity. And it was those who made these poultices who made a lot of money. . . .

This pestilence began in March, as was said, and ended in September 1348. And people began to return to look after their houses and possessions. And there were so many houses full of goods without a master that it was stupefying. Then those who would inherit these goods began to appear. And such it was that those who had nothing found themselves rich with what did not seem to be theirs and they were unseemly because of it. Women and men began to dress ostentatiously.

From Stefani, Marchione di Coppo. *Cronaca fiorentina. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, Vol. 30, Niccolo Rodolico, ed. Citta di Castello: 1903-13. Quoted in Duane Osheim, "Plagues and Public Health in Renaissance Europe," The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, University of Virginia. <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html>

Lesson 2

Student Handout 2.6

The Decameron

The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague as it ravaged the city of Florence in 1348. The experience inspired him to write *The Decameron*, a story of three women and seven men who escaped the disease by fleeing to a villa outside the city. In his introduction to the fictional portion of his book, Boccaccio gives a graphic description of the effects of the epidemic on his city.

The Signs of Impending Death

“The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumors. In a short space of time these tumors spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumor had been and still remained.

No doctor’s advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease, An enormous number of ignorant men and women set up as doctors in addition to those who were trained. Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of the tumors described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching.”

Varying Reactions to Disaster

“Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety.

Some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They formed small communities, living entirely separate from everybody

else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting at what happened. They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking immoderately, or went into other people's houses, doing only those things which pleased them. This they could easily do because everyone felt doomed and had abandoned his property, so that most houses became common property and any stranger who went in made use of them as if he had owned them. And with all this bestial behavior, they avoided the sick as much as possible.

In this suffering and misery of our city, the authority of human and divine laws almost disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and the executors of the laws were all dead or sick or shut up with their families, so that no duties were carried out. Every man was therefore able to do as he pleased.

Many others adopted a course of life midway between the two just described. They did not restrict their victuals so much as the former, nor allow themselves to be drunken and dissolute like the latter, but satisfied their appetites moderately. They did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands, in the belief that it was an excellent thing to comfort the brain with such odors; for the whole air was infected with the smell of dead bodies, Of sick persons and medicines.

Others again held a still more cruel opinion, which they thought would keep them safe. They said that the only medicine against the plague-stricken was to go right away from them. Men and women, convinced of this and caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad or at least to the country round Florence, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them but strike only those who remained within the walls of the city, or as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come."

The Breakdown of Social Order

"One citizen avoided another, hardly any neighbor troubled about others, relatives never or hardly ever visited each other. Moreover, such terror was struck into the hearts of men and women by this calamity, that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children, as if they had not been theirs.

Thus, a multitude of sick men and women were left without any care, except from the charity of friends (but these were few), or the greed, of servants, though not many of these could be had even for high wages, Moreover, most of them were coarse-minded men and women, who did

little more than bring the sick what they asked for or watch over them when they were dying. And very often these servants lost their lives and their earnings.

Mass Burials

“The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbors smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner. Most of them were treated in the same manner by the survivors, who were more concerned to get rid of their rotting bodies than moved by charity towards the dead. With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the door; where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen. They then were laid on biers or, as these were often lacking, on tables.

Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full.”

From Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, vol. 1, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Book League of America, 1930), quoted in “The Black Death, 1348,” EyeWitness to History, www.ibiscom.com (2001).