



Written by Creighton Broadhurst
 Cover Art by Jeremy McHugh
 Editing by Joseph Browning

Layout by Suzi Yee
 Playtesters: Dr. Karen Broadhurst, Andy Hodges, Eric Menge,
 and Sam Weiss.

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Foreword



he Great Pestilence. The Black Death. The Great Mortality. Few events in the history of the world awaken such feelings of dread, fear, and impending doom as the arrival of plague. Plague can ravage whole nations or continents, devastating populations, annihilating communities and shattering the rule of law. In the grip of a truly virulent contagion, economies crumble, chaos reigns, and society

irrevocably changes as the survivors emerge into a quieter, emptier world. Particularly savage outbreaks can topple city-states, kingdoms, and even empires, plunging whole regions into anarchy and war.

Plague is a killer on a truly epic scale, responsible for more deaths, misery, and suffering than all but the most genocidal and hard-fought of wars. Even the foulest atrocities of the most energetic and black-hearted of tyrants pale into insignificance compared to the destructive might of the plague.

A society gripped by plague descends into a nightmare from which death is the most common deliverance. The sick are shut up in their homes to die, graveyards overflow, neighbors turn against one another, and parents abandon their infected children to die. Trade and industry cease as survivors limit their exposure to the afflicted in a desperate bid for survival. Taverns, pubs, and other places of public assembly close while those lucky enough to escape infection pray to the gods for deliverance. In short order, public services – such as they are – are overwhelmed and collapse. Law and order breaks down, refuse and the bodies of the dead litter the streets, and the essential business of the land grinds to a halt.

As the plague rampages through the streets, the afflicted die in ever-increasing numbers. As is typical in such situations, it is the poor that suffer the most, dying in their thousands. Those with the funds, or the means, flee; some already carry the contagion and spread it into the surrounding countryside gifting previously untouched settlements with misery, suffering, and death. The rich retreat to their country estates, pay clerics to provide the much coveted Remove Disease ritual, or isolate themselves behind high walls, praying for deliverance.

Hysteria, persecution, and bigotry stalk the streets. The strain of living in such conditions drives many unfortunates mad, while others seek scapegoats upon which to vent their anger and frustration. Minority groups and followers of certain gods are both fair game to such people. Public lynchings and murder become commonplace as people seek to protect themselves, placate the angry gods responsible for this terrible pestilence, or take advantage of the chaos to right old wrongs or use it as an excuse for personal gain.

In the bleakest depths of this nightmare, charlatans offer hope in the form of expensive elixirs and cure-alls guaranteed to heal the imbibed, if only the purchaser can afford it. Alongside such odious individuals the few clerics and apothecaries that have not fled labor to control the outbreak and to cure the infected. Without an understanding of basic hygiene and virology, however, such efforts are all but useless. Without restorative magic, most of the afflicted are inevitably doomed to suffer a lonely, drawn-out, and agonizing death.

Eventually the contagion burns itself out or moves on, leaving shattered villages, towns, and cities in its wake. The survivors emerge to a completely different world. In cases of severe plague, the old social order disintegrates. Fields lie fallow, cattle wander untended, villages are slowly abandoned, food is scarce, and the survivors'

For four years between 1347 and 1351, the Black Death stalked across Europe mercilessly savaging villages, towns, and cities. In its wake, it left a trail of death and suffering unparalleled in human history until the titanic battles of World War II six centuries later. Europe became a charnel house. Over the next hundred years or so, as successive waves of disease savaged the continent, millions died either by contracting the plague or as a direct result of the chaos and social upheaval that followed. Conservative estimates place Europe's death toll at somewhere between one-third and one-half of its entire population, while other, more apocalyptic accounts suggest that up to 75% of the population died. In China, during approximately the same period, the population fell from approximately 120 million to 60 million.

quality of life plummets as they struggle merely to survive. In such conditions, opportunists are quick to strike, staking claim to, or buying up at ludicrously low prices, vast swathes of land. Such developments can spell the death knell of the established order as the balance of power within society shifts.

Plague is also a catalyst of change, and some good can come from the unspeakable suffering and torment. Epidemics and pandemics are often followed by periods of unbridled creativity and advancement. Technological and magical advancements improve the lot of the common folk, while society often enjoys something of a renaissance as the old ways are cast aside in favor of new traditions, laws, and values. Wealth and land are redistributed into fewer hands, meaning that after some short-term deprivation the general standard of living increases dramatically. During such times of change, opportunities abound for social advancement or general enrichment. When the plague struck, PCs could be but landless adventurers no different than many thousands of others roaming the land. After the plague relinquishes its ebon grasp, however, they could have risen to prominence perhaps becoming great merchants, renowned champions of good, or even nobles holding high title and great estates.

Three Caveats

Plague explores the effects of a powerful contagion upon a fantasy medieval society and provides GMs with the tools for using a plague as an exciting backdrop or as the driving force in a campaign. However, when reading this sourcebook, the GM should keep three things in mind.

Caveat One

This sourcebook is not an in-depth treatise on the epidemiology of plague. Rather it streamlines the concept of plague to enable fast and enjoyable game play without bogging the GM down with such details as the exact species of rat believed to carry the plague-carrying fleas or the reason why one kind of plague mutates into another.

For example, during the Black Death different varieties of the plague – bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic – had different mortality rates, infection methods, and origins. While the exact bacterial differences between the various types of plague is no doubt fascinating, this level of realism is not required, or even desirable, at the game