

THE WAGNER FREE INSTITUTE OF SCIENCE

Fall 2020: HISTORY OF SCIENCE SERIES

Plagues and Epidemics in History

Professor Darin Hayton

Dates: 6 Wednesdays, October 7 to November 11, 2020

Time: The class meets from 6:30 to 7:45 PM

The course will be held online. A Zoom link will be sent to registered students.

To register for the course, you must sign up through EventBrite. To sign up, click on the link on the course schedule webpage. If you need assistance, please call 215-763-6529 x14.

Course Description

Epidemics seem to burst onto the historical scene unannounced, killing with complete impunity aristocracy and paupers alike. Through a series of case studies, this course analyzes the impact of epidemics on human societies, including mortality rates, efforts to contain the contagion and the infected, attempts to treat the purported illness, and expressions in art and literature. Examples will concentrate on pre-modern epidemics, from the Plague of Athens in the fifth century BCE through the great medieval plagues and the French Disease (typically equated with syphilis) to the late, major plague outbreaks in the seventeenth century. The course will conclude by looking at more recent epidemics, Yellow Fever in eighteenth-century Philadelphia and Typhoid Mary in early twentieth-century New York.

This course will examine a variety of related questions: How did lay people explain the advent and spread of an epidemic? How did various experts — e.g., religious, legal, medical experts — account for, treat, and protect against contagions and epidemics? How have those same experts used plagues to blame or stigmatize groups of people? To what extent have epidemics been agents of social, economic, religious and political change, or to what extent were they the product of those changes? What is the relationship, if any, between epidemics and public health?

Course Schedule – lectures begin at 6:30 PM

1. Wednesday, October 7, 2020 - Disease or Epidemic or Plague? That depends

Not every disease is an epidemic, and there are no clear guidelines for what transforms a disease into an epidemic. To confuse matters further, not every epidemic is a disease. Despite the variability in these terms, humans have reacted in some consistent ways when they confronted with an epidemic.

2. Wednesday, October 14, 2020 - Ancient Plagues

This week will look at two important plagues that assaulted ancient Mediterranean civilizations: the Plague of Athens in 430 BCE and Plague of Justinian between 541-549 CE (often called the first pandemic). We can see in these very early accounts rhumb lines that will continue to orient later efforts to describe and explain epidemics.

3. Wednesday, October 21, 2020 - The Black Death (facts, figures, explanations)

The plague erupted in 1347 and raged across Europe over the next few years, killing more than 30% of Europe's population. After the initial pandemic, plague remained endemic throughout Europe for the next 300 years, erupting seasonally in cities across the continent. This week we will try to get a better sense of the scope of the pandemic. We will also look at the ways contemporary observers explained the disease—its origins, symptoms, and spread, as well as preventions and cures.

4. Wednesday, October 28, 2020 - The Black Death (art, literature, consequences)

The plague had a profound effect on European society and culture well beyond the simple numbers of dead. Art and literature both reflected the anxieties and fears felt by people in late medieval and early modern society. Cities and kingdoms introduced new laws in response to the plague, not only to control the spread of the disease but also to limit the ways laborers could benefit from their newly empowered position. We can even see the development of ideas about public health emerging in response to the crises.

5. Wednesday, November 4, 2020 - The French Disease

In 1495 an unknown disease appeared in the French troops besieging Naples, quickly spread up the Italian peninsula, and through Europe. While it didn't seem to kill people as quickly as the plague, it nonetheless terrified people across the continent. Within months rulers, physicians, theologians, astrologers, and opportunists were offering explanations that seemed eerily similar in logic and structure to those offered for the plague. The interesting difference in this case was the incredible specificity of their explanations. This week we will look at the early, virulent years of the French Disease.

6. Wednesday, November 11, 2020 - Modern Epidemics, Yellow Fever and Typhoid Fever

Yellow fever and Typhoid fever offer an opportunity to see how traditional ideas about contagion and disease continued to shape ideas about epidemics. They also let us see how ideas about public health that were developing in the 14th century continued to pose real challenges in the early 20th. Part of the story is, of course, the development of germ theory, but much of the story remains beyond the narrow confines of medicine. We will look at both the changing (or not) medical explanations as well as the inescapable social factors such as naming the disease, identifying origins, and ethical dilemmas that pit individual liberties against possible collective safety.

Suggested Readings

Readings for this course will be available for download from dhayton.haverford.edu/plague

About the Professor

Dr. Darin Hayton is a historian of science whose research focuses on the creation and dissemination of scientific knowledge, especially the science of the stars (astrology and astronomy) in pre-Modern Europe and the late Byzantine Empire. He is an Associate Professor of the history of science at Haverford College and Chair of the Editorial Board of Lever Press, an innovative Open Access scholarly press. He recently published "The Crown and the Cosmos. Astrology and the Politics of Maximilian I." He has taught for the Wagner since 2016.

Contact information for the Wagner Free Institute of Science

Office hours: Monday – Friday, from 9 to 5 PM Main telephone: 215-763-6529

Wagner staff will coordinate course registration and questions about online participation. For more information, please contact:

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