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Images of the Black Death, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

Contemporary accounts testify to the plague's terrifying physical, social, and psychological impact. Images from the period document the ravages of the epidemic as well, sometimes in gruesome detail. The engraving in Figure 12.1, for example, shows a plague victim covered in the dark blotches characteristic of the disease. The town in the background appears to be going up in flames while lightning flares in the sky above. What else do you think is going on in this image?



Figure 12.1 The Black Death, 1348.

Source: The Bridgeman Art Library.

Figures 12.2 and 12.3 show two well-documented phenomena of the plague years: The first depicts a group of flagellants, members of a movement who wandered from town to town beating themselves with whips studded with iron nails in an effort to do penance for the sins they believed had brought on the plague. Written accounts confirm many elements in this picture: Flagellants usually carried crosses or banners with crosses on them, wore long pleated skirts, and went around bare-chested, the better to make their scourging as painful as possible. Figure 12.3 illustrates a similar impulse toward punishment as a means of coping with the plague, but this time the violence is directed outward, against Jews, so often the scapegoats in troubled times. Baseless accusations that Jews poisoned wells to spread the plague resulted in many such attacks against them during the period.



Figure 12.2 Flagellants, from a fifteenth-century chronicle from Constance, Switzerland.

Source: © Bettmann/CORBIS.



Figure 12.3 The burning of Jews in an early printed woodcut.

Source: Mary Evans Picture Library/Alamy.

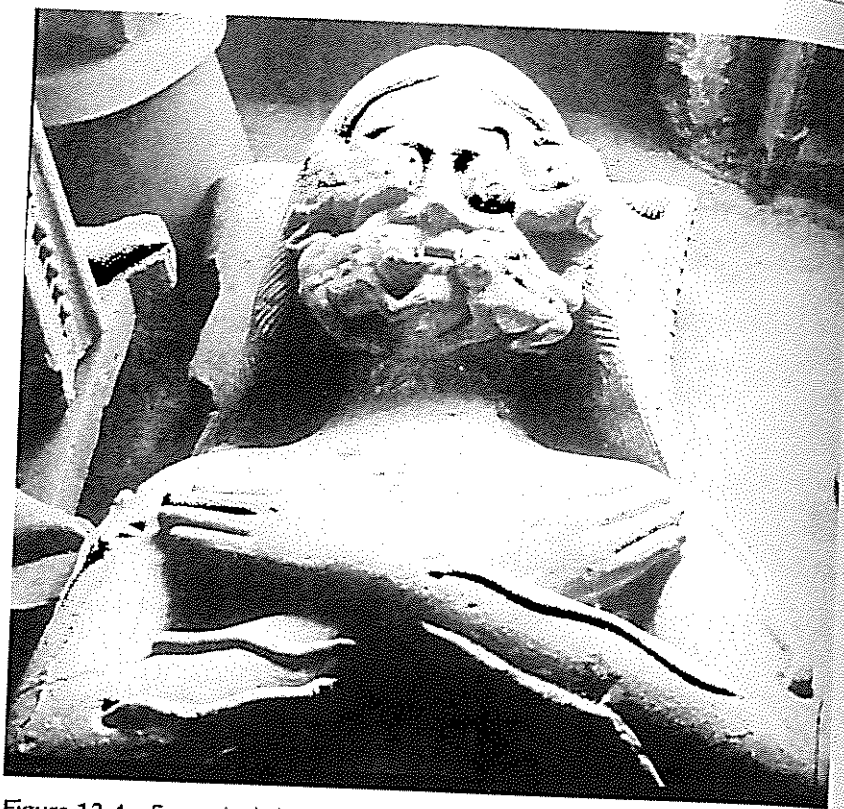


Figure 12.4 François de la Sarra, tomb at La Sarraz, Switzerland, c. 1390.
Source: Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne.

The final image, Figure 12.4, is one of a transi tomb from 1390. Transi tombs, which emerged during and after the plague era, were a major departure from standard funerary monuments that typically offered an idealized depiction of the deceased. Instead these tombs showed decaying or skeletal corpses covered with worms and other emblems of bodily corruption. Scholars differ over their meaning. How might you explain them?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

What can these images tell us about fourteenth-century people's beliefs about the possible causes—medical or religious—of the plague? Do the images suggest a greater belief in medical or religious causes? Think about the social and religious changes wrought by the plague recounted in the de' Mussis and Boccaccio readings. What evidence, if any, do you see in these images of these changes?