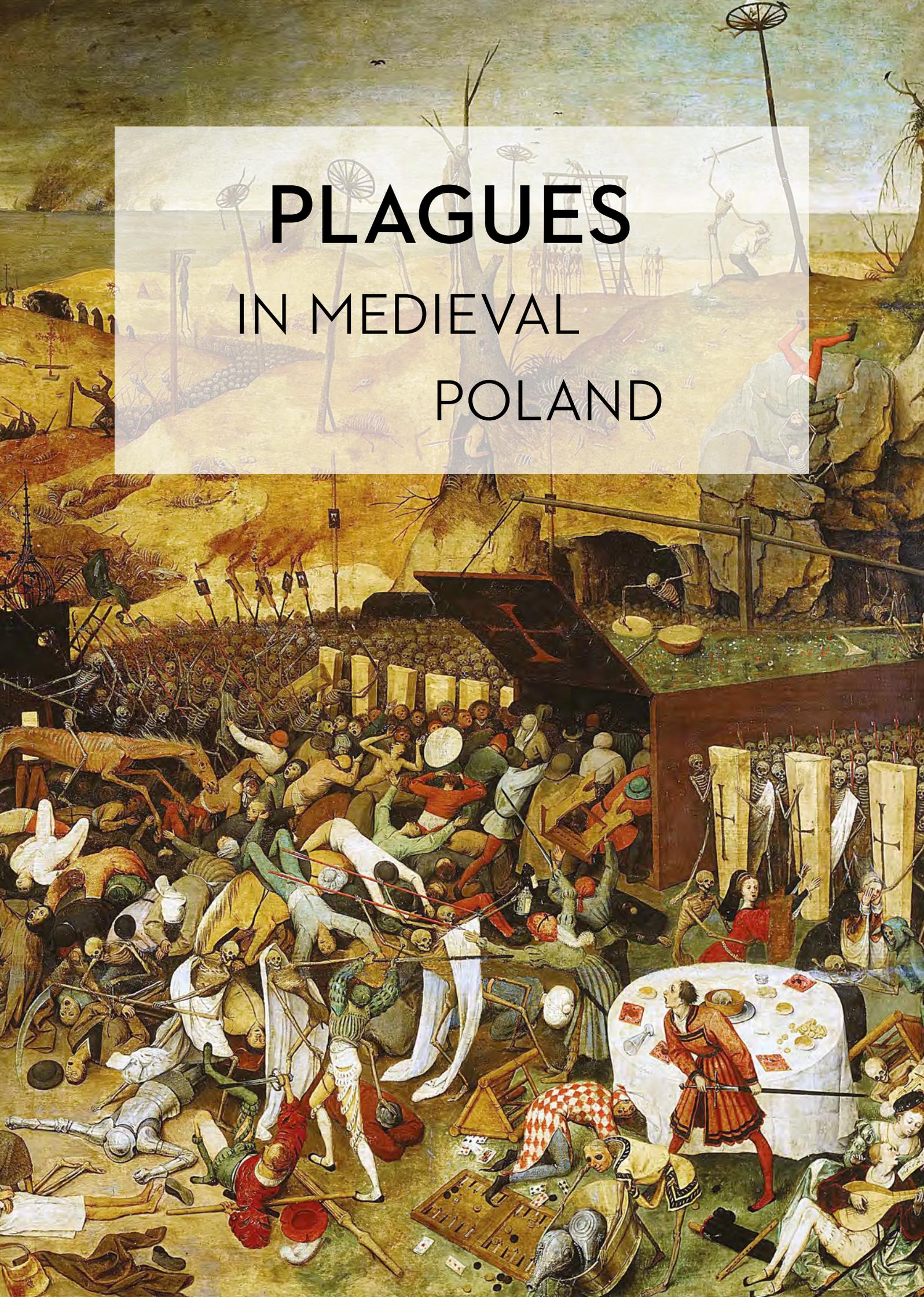


Triumph of Death (1562) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
which reflects the shock and horror commonly caused in society
by the black death / photo: public domain





PLAGUES

IN MEDIEVAL

POLAND

We are living in a time when we are suddenly faced with challenges that plagued our ancestors. All over the world, we have well-equipped, modern medical laboratories, outstanding scientists; we are able to send humans into space, but in the face of invisible viruses or bacteria we are still helpless, similarly as the people in the Middle Ages.



Danse macabre – Michael Wolgemut, drawing from 1493

At the beginning, the black death should be mentioned. Lately, it has been frequently cited in the media and was allegedly epidemic in Poland in the 14th century. Some scientists, based on Jan Długosz's chronicle written over 100 years later (*Roczniki*, i.e. *The Chronicles of the Famous Polish Kingdom*, original Latin title: *Annales seu cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*) believe that the black death reached the Polish borders at that time. However, research by Dr. Piotr Guzowski from the University of Białystok should definitely put an end to these speculations. The chronicle of the undoubtedly outstanding Polish historian Jan Długosz was published much later than the sources on which the researcher from Białystok relied.

Most probably, the virulent strain of the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, which caused the black death pandemic, came to Europe from the Caucasus on a ship carrying infected people, which reached Messina in 1347. A decade ago, DNA tests performed on skeletons from mass graves across Europe have unequivocally confirmed that the disease which caused the black death pandemic was the bubonic plague. These results have been published since 2010. The historian from Białystok, together with a team of researchers, challenged the theory of the occurrence of the plague in the mid-14th century in our country. Their arguments are based, among others, on the very detailed accounts of the so-called *Świętopietrze*, i.e. the Pope's tax. This tax was paid per capita, so the great loss of population in those years should have been noted in the very meticulous accounts. No such evidence has been found. However, it is apparent in the registers of other countries. In other words, even if the black death, or the bubonic plague, reached the Polish borders of that time, it did not cause significant damage. Jan Długosz's message can be very simply explained in terms of "plagiarism" from the Western accounts concerning such events. This was not the first chronicler caught 'colorizing' history – especially with regards to events taking place before his birth.

Even if the famous black death did not cause any major perturbations in Poland, it does not mean that there was no miasma in the country. The walled up cities and lack of ventilation caused the spread of various diseases, most often cholera, which are virtually unknown today. What was the behavior of people during such epidemics? In 1425, a plague spread in Lesser Poland, but unfortunately, the chroniclers did not specify the name of the disease. King Władysław II Jagiełło and his wife Zofia Holszańska left for Lithuania, but soon the plague spread there as well. The royal couple and Grand Duke Vytautas the Great had to flee from castles and fortified settlements into the Lithuanian forests. It is interesting to mention that the little prince Władysław was sent back to Chęciny (Świętokrzyskie Voivodeship) with his nanny, hoping that he would be safe in the castle located at great height.

In 1451 a great plague broke out in Mazovia and quickly spread to Greater Poland. Many villages and small towns died out at that time, and the plague raged from April to late autumn.

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Hygienic problems, poor nutrition, the emergence of many dangerous diseases, including an increase of the incidence of infectious diseases have led to greater interest in the subject of death, its inevitability and equality in the face of death. As a consequence, motives such as danse macabre (dance of death) have developed. The picture *Taniec śmierci* (Dance of Death) shows a painting from the Bernardine Church in Cracow 17th century.

Around July, the situation in the town Sochaczew was so severe that 40 people were buried in one grave every day. In October, the Chapter meeting in Gniezno was canceled, since at that time it required personal participation. The plague did not spare Silesia and the Czech Republic either, although it treated Lesser Poland gently. Unfortunately, the terrified people from the infected areas – if they could afford it – fled to the lands around Cracow, where they brought the plague with them. The plague broke out with impetus in 1452 in Cracow and in the region of Wieluń. For this reason, truces were quickly made, since there was no possibility of continuing to fight. 1452 was a bad year in the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania. The plague also spread to the Lithuanian towns and cities, and a chronicler noted that it was so strong that people were walking, eating, or drinking – and suddenly died. The disease persisted until the end of the year.

In 1464, the plague in Prussia made the ongoing peace talks with the Teutonic Order more difficult, and their participant, the chronicler Jan Długosz, had to flee together with his company. A very great plague broke out in the year when negotiations with the Order were finished, and a peace treaty was signed in Toruń – the whole Kingdom of Poland was affected by it. Probably it was cholera, as it is favored by humid air and warm winter. In some areas, this plague existed until 1468, and in Cracow courts were held outside the city, in the surrounding towns, where the situation was less dangerous. Polish King Kazimierz Jagiellończyk left Krakow and went to Lithuania, and his children were placed in the Tyniec monastery, which was isolated and situated on a hill.

In 1482, Poland was hit by another pandemic; a severe plague of *pestis furiosa* spread across the country and lasted over a year. It probably came from Hungary, and therefore the first provinces of southern Poland were affected. In Cracow about 40-50 people died every day, but in Krosno (southeastern Poland) there were 80 daily deaths. As a result, the town was quickly depopulated. An interesting fact is that in 1495 in Silesia a venereal plague was believed to be spreading because of the immoral behavior of the local population, but there is no confirmation for this from other sources.



The plague was often relieved by the harsh winter and the long frost that had been waited for, since a wet summer was conducive to the development of miasma.

Of course, these are not all the plagues that broke out in medieval Poland, but they affected the entire country and constituted a real problem.

Which methods were resorted to save oneself in these times? The most common one was to escape from the infected places – of course, if a person had the required financial means and opportunities. The people of the Middle Ages were convinced that the further away from the outbreak of the plague they went, the safer they would be. However, it was not taken into account that in this way the fleeing people themselves contributed to the spread of the disease. When news came that miasma was approaching, preventive measures were taken. The gates were tightly closed, no one was allowed into the cities, and the inhabitants were isolated from the outside world. However, if the plague made it into the town, the infected houses were subjected to strict isolation, and their inhabitants were forbidden to leave. Visits were also no longer allowed. Food was left on the threshold, and if someone had to leave the house for various reasons, they were forced to carry a white cane, which indicated an infected person. Houses affected by the plague were marked with white paint so that it was known which of them were to be avoided.

Public gatherings, visits at the inn, and the use of bathhouses were strictly forbidden. The councillors also tried to keep the city clean, since they were aware that the plague often resulted from disregard for hygiene. Therefore, it was forbidden to pour urine into the street, drive out pigs, and the inhabitants were ordered to keep the streets and gutters clean. Clothing and belongings of people who died from the plague were burned.

In the chronicles or other documents the preparation of medicines or doctors' visits are rarely mentioned. These measures were rather for the most affluent – predominantly the rulers and members of the court. The rest had to follow the rules and count on their instincts, luck, and their body's immunity.