

Astrological Medicine and the Black Death in Europe, 1347-1351

During the final year of my undergraduate degree, I completed a dissertation in which I provided an overview of the key tenets of astrological medicine during the late medieval period. As my Special Subject – *The Enthronement of Learning: Medieval Universities and their Legacy* – centred on the development of medieval universities, I focused primarily on learned astrological medicine, i.e. that written, taught, and studied by the men who attended European *studia*. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting the research for this assignment, and I would love the opportunity to explore this area of history further as part of the MPhil in Medieval History.

If accepted onto the MPhil, I hope to focus my research on the use of astrological medicine as an explanation for the Black Death. I briefly discussed the perceived relationship between the 1345 conjunction and the plague in the fourth and final chapter of my undergraduate dissertation, however, due to word constraints, I did not have enough space to explore this idea as fully as I would have liked. Therefore, I would like to do so in my MPhil dissertation. I would particularly like to focus on the *compendium* on the Black Death written by the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Paris in 1348 – for which an English translation is available in full, online and in print – as this report heavily emphasises the causal role of the conjunction, despite the Parisian medical faculty usually not being proponents of astrology or astrological medicine. The Parisian report is also particularly interesting as it was written at the behest of the French king, Philip IV, whose grandson, Charles V, founded a college in Paris which has come to be seen as ‘a joint college of astrology and medicine’.¹ The French crown became renowned for its support of astrology, and so it would be interesting to explore whether this royal patronage stimulated or influenced the faculty’s emphasis on the 1345 conjunction. Alongside the Parisian report, I intend to also analyse plague tracts written by other learned physicians, such as the influential tract written by Geoffrey de Meaux, a French physician with royal service.

There has certainly been an increase in writing on medieval astrology during the twenty-first century, however, astrological medicine remains an underexplored area of history. The majority of historians have tended to focus on either the history of medicine or the history of astrology, and therefore only mention astrological medicine briefly, if at all. In particular, scholars of the Black Death often overlook the astrological explanation provided by contemporaries, instead focusing predominantly on miasma and God’s punishment; this is perhaps because the theories of miasma and God’s will are more in accordance with the traditional historiographic view of medieval thought and knowledge, and astrology is still seen as representative of the “backwardness” of the medieval period. As a result, I would like to assess how widespread the astrological explanation of the Black Death was within contemporary plague tracts. In addition, I would be interested to see whether those who included an astrological explanation in their tracts were usual proponents of astrological medicine, or whether the universality and devastation of the plague drove them to accept the possible influence of the stars.

While Joseph P. Byrne included a number of astrological topics in his *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* (2009), these topics were discussed only briefly and objectively, as is the nature of encyclopaedia entries. Similarly, Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., highlights the longevity of the astrological explanation persisted through the medieval period and the Renaissance in his *Cultures of Plague: Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (2010). Although Rosemary Horrox’s *The Black Death* was published twenty-five years ago, it remains a key

¹ Carole Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1997), p. 86.

introductory work for those who wish to study contemporary explanations and accounts of the Black Death. It also contains numerous plague tracts written by physicians from across Europe, including the Parisian medical faculty.

However, as a result of a lack of extensive, in-depth secondary material which focuses specifically on the astrological explanation for the fourteenth-century plague epidemic, I relied predominantly on primary source material when writing my dissertation chapter on the Black Death. This allowed me to develop my source interpretation and analysis skills, which will be vital for the MPhil. Moreover, this allowed me to become extremely familiar with the plague tracts and to form my own conclusions from this material, instead of simply repeating conclusions previously advanced by historians.

As I will be focusing more on the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Paris – as opposed to the University of Bologna, the main focus of my undergraduate dissertation – I expect to study the *Chartularium universitatis parisiensis* (transcribed and compiled by Heinrich Denifle and Emile Chatelaine) more heavily for this research. In addition, the work of French historian, Dr Danielle Jacquart, is likely to be extremely helpful, as Jacquart has written numerous papers about the medical faculty at Paris, astrological medicine at Paris, as well as astrology in general. Unfortunately, the majority of Jacquart's work is written in French, however, I am currently working to develop my knowledge of French in order to be able to access more of Jacquart's work.