

Vivian Nutton (ed.), *Pestilential complexities: understanding medieval plague, Medical History*, Supplement No. 27, London, Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL, 2008, pp. viii, 130, £35.00, €52.00, \$72.00 (hardback 978-0-85484-116-5).

The identification of the plague genome in 2001 and the development of a method to trace the disease in excavated human remains since 1998 have re-sparked interest in the Black Death. The present volume (and the 2006 conference whose keynote papers it reunites) is an attempt to reflect on the state of the question and, if not resolve problems, at least to demarcate them in a clear way. The result is a compelling collection of authoritative approaches to the Black Death, at the same time snapshots of current debates and attempts to strip down disagreements to their cores.

The basic question that runs like a red thread throughout the volume is: was the Black Death a series of outbreaks of plague caused by its identified agent, *Yersinia pestis*, or not? If yes, why are there so many apparent discrepancies between the medieval pandemic and the one that broke out in the last years of the nineteenth century? If anything, this book shows that despite strong arguments from both sides, the jury is still out.

Vivian Nutton's Introduction provides an overview of the historiography of the Black Death as well as a summary of the papers in this volume. The contributions by Ann Carmichael and Kay Peter Jankrift, both historians of early modern and medieval Europe, deal with the descriptions of the disease in their sources, highlighting such aspects as the construction (or perception) of the plague as universal, as opposed to local or regional and the problematic feature of imitation by later authors of earlier descriptions. But Carmichael makes a very strong case in taking medieval descriptions seriously by offering a detailed survey of what medical authors diagnosed as plague with particular emphasis on a case study of Milan.

Lars Walløe, a professor of physiology, mounts a refutation of Samuel K Cohn's

revisionist arguments as expressed chiefly in his 2002 monograph *The Black Death transformed*. Walløe states that the medieval plagues and the current disease are the same and suggests that differences in transmission, mortality patterns and epidemiology, that constituted Cohn's main arguments, can be explained by differences in climate and modes of habitation, as well as the presence of and interaction with animal vectors and carriers of the disease. He makes his case by juxtaposing medieval and early modern descriptions of the disease with modern ones. Perhaps not quite meant as a reply to criticism his work has received, Cohn's own text shows him adopting a different approach: instead of opting for the theory of a different disease as the cause for the Black Death (as he had done in his book), he presents here an impressive amount of data whose goal is to show the weaknesses in the identification between medieval and current plagues. This is both constructive and useful, as it can now serve as a basis for research targeting these exact problems.

Daniel Antoine's paper is an overview of the possibilities and problems of archaeological research into the plague with special focus on the plague pits excavated on the site of the Royal Mint in London—one of the very few mass burial sites securely connected to the Black Death in Europe. The last paper in this book is the short, authoritative account on what we know about the plague today by Elisabeth Carniel, director of the *Yersinia* Research Unit of the Institut Pasteur. She highlights the differences between today and the Middle Ages that will have equally manifested themselves as differences in the epidemiology and ecology of the disease. Her conclusion is telling: "... it should be emphasized that it is not possible to reject the plague aetiology of the Black Death simply because certain symptoms and epidemiological features do not match those found today" (p. 122).

This fascinating book will certainly reposition the debate on the Black Death and inspire new research. Perhaps it will lead experts to discover why the plague has

changed between the fourteenth and the twentieth century—a mere moment in bacterial time.

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Rosalie David (ed.), *Egyptian mummies and modern science*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. xxi, 304, £60.00, \$100.00 (hardback 978-0-521-86579-1).

This book edited by Rosalie David, the world-famous Egyptologist, contains the most up-to-date collection of contributions on the scientific methodologies applied to Egyptian mummy studies, carried out by the research team of Manchester University. The background to this work is to be found in the pioneering studies directed by Rosalie David since the 1970s on the Egyptian mummified remains at the Museum of Manchester, whose results were first reported in the 1979 volume *The Manchester Museum Mummy Project*. Other volumes appeared later, *Evidence embalmed: modern medicine and the mummies of ancient Egypt* in 1984, and *Science in Egyptology* in 1986, the latter collecting together the results of the two symposia held at the University of Manchester in 1979 and 1984, where international and multi-disciplinary specialists discussed the most relevant topics of the field. In the last twenty years work has progressed with the application of new analyses and techniques of modern medicine to Egyptian mummies studies.

The book is divided into five parts, each containing chapters assigned to different experts in the field. An up-to-date bibliography rounds off the collection. Part one by Rosalie David provides some background information on the first scientific and multidisciplinary study of the mummies, the Manchester Museum Mummy Project. This project, from its early phase in the 1970s continued until 2003, the year in which a centre dedicated to biomedical Egyptology,

the KNH Centre at the University of Manchester, was established, representing a model for similar projects in other countries. The author introduces the reader to the field, and provides a brief summary on mummification practices in ancient Egypt, from prehistoric times to the Roman Period.

In the second part of the book the diagnostic techniques used in modern medical practice are discussed in their application to the study of human and animal mummies. After a historical background, the specialist of each discipline illustrates the methods and results that can be obtained through imaging studies, including conventional X-ray, modern Computed Tomography (CT), Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and Ultrasound (US), then endoscopy, histology, immunohistochemistry and DNA analysis; a selection of analytical methods for studying organic matter in archaeological sites, and the materials and techniques used for facial reconstruction are reviewed. In addition, this section is enriched with reports on dental diseases in the ancient Egyptian population and with a brief summary of the palaeopathological findings in literature, with particular relevance to ancient Egypt.

The third part is entirely devoted to pharmacology. Egyptian medicine is examined by comparing the information provided by the written sources with archaeological and palaeopathological evidence. The *longue durée* debate on the use of intoxicants and drugs in ancient Egypt is summarized, presenting the most recent conclusions of the research. The fourth section introduces the formation and role of the International Ancient Egyptian Tissue Bank, which collects tissue samples from Egyptian mummified remains, representing a unique resource for a wide range of studies. A survey on the conservation treatments for Egyptian mummies is also provided.

In the fifth and last part of the book the future possibilities of biomedical Egyptology, with particular regard to the KNH Centre at the University of Manchester, are briefly presented.