

Abstract

In 1348 the plague struck Europe and held it in its grip until the 18th century. The Czech lands were no exception, although regular outbreaks are not reported until after 1348.

The disease was caused by *Yersinia pestis* bacteria and transmitted primarily by the common rat. It took three different forms: pneumonic, septicemic, and bubonic. The year 1348 marked the most significant outbreak of the pandemic, referred to as the Black Death. However, the infection did not spread significantly to Prague and Bohemia until 1380.

The societal crisis caused by the Black Death is reflected in art, particularly the so-called Dance of Death and Triumph of Death paintings. Plague columns associated with the cult surrounding anti-plague saints became common sights in Bohemia. St. Maria was universally revered. St. Sebastian, St. Rocco, and St. Rosalie were invoked specifically for protection against the plague. Individual countries also sought protection from their national patrons, such as St. Wenceslas, the patron saint of Bohemia.

In Bohemia, the plague is more commonly associated with modern rather than medieval times. Outbreaks recurred roughly every twelve years. In an effort to curb the epidemic, plague orders were enacted. These documents provided for quarantine measures, the closing of borders, the establishment of lazarettos, and the observance of certain hygiene requirements. Plague writings contained advice how to avoid infection and how to treat it, including medical formulations

Prague experienced its last outbreak in 1713. That epidemic decimated nearly a quarter of its population, killing an estimated 10,000 – 12,000 people. To this day, the Olšany and Lesser Town cemeteries, and the plague column at Lesser Town Square serve as a reminder of the plague's reign in Prague.

keywords: Black Death, Dance of Death Prague, early modern period, lazarettos, plague columns, plague orders, plague outbreaks, plague writings

