

HIS113: World Civilizations I

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Sourcebook Chapter 13

13.2a The Plague: *The Muqaddimah* (Ibn Khaldun, before 1406)

1. How is ibn Khaldun's explanation of the plague different from the plague descriptions by Thucydides and Procopius (as well as from al-Maqrizi's description, in source 13.2b below)?

Ibn Khaldun was an Arab philosopher and the son of an Islamic scholar. He explained that plagues happened due to polluted air in a large and crowded population. He said it results in putrefaction, or the process of decaying in an organic matter, and the evil moisture. When it goes in through the lungs, the body gets infected and spreads. The plague could spread easily and multiply. Symptoms include fever, and the infected would usually die. His explanation was different from the others because he wrote a scientific observation of how the plague spread, instead of bringing religion or other reasons into it.

Thucydides' description of the plague was different from Ibn Khaldun. He described the struggles of many deaths seen, including the doctors who were supposed to treat the patients. Prayers seemed to not work, and he described symptoms in detail. Early sufferers of the disease had stomachaches, vomiting, they were so hot that they did not want to be clothed, insomnia, and restlessness. It gradually became worse after a week or so when the plague moved to other parts of the body. Some people went blind. Many became hopeless and felt that this was worse than being put on trial and punished.

Procopius said the plague was due to collateral damage. He said that it originated from Egypt and reached Byzantium. Like Thucydides, prayers did not work. He also spoke about the symptoms of the plague. He mentioned about the aftermath and how the dead were buried. There was no space so they would have to mount the towers and have mass burials. He also criticized the emperor, saying that the higher ups knew about the plague for years but did not take any action to warn other people. He also believed that God was punishing the emperor and therefore killed his people.

Al-Maqrizi explained that the plague was very costly, and it was a more social view. He wrote about how people felt and what they were doing

during the Black Plague. It was similar to what happened when the Covid Pandemic hit last year. Mosques and lodges, houses of worship were closed. There were so many deaths that they would pile up. Family celebrations and marriages were canceled, and the economy was suffering.

2. What is the moral of the story in this explanation? Does having an explanation with a moral make this a more satisfying account of the plague than simple descriptions?

The moral of the story is to tell the reader that humans are responsible for the plague. Although the civilization starts out great and plentiful, it can end in disaster. Ibn Khaldun also believed that God was behind the plague and that no matter what happens, good or bad, it is all up to God. He said that the only type of medicine is used for a divine blessing that only God can grant. It had nothing to do with finding medicine, only faith is the medicine.