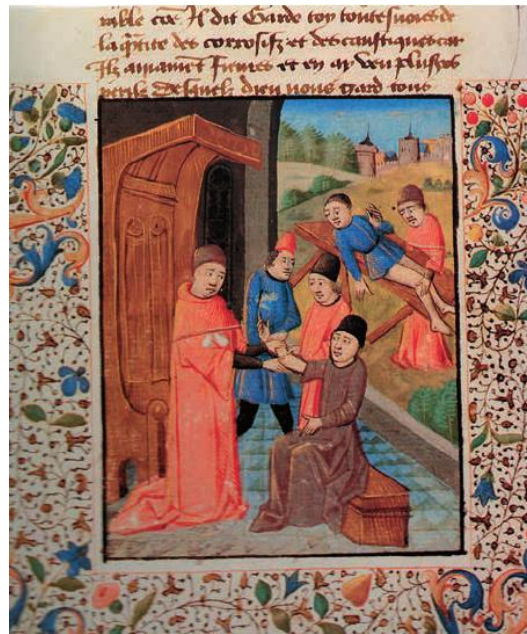


Guy De Chauliac

[Guy de Chauliac](#) (c. 1300-1368) was a French physician and surgeon and Pope Clement VI's attending physician. He wrote the *Inventarium sive chirurgia magna* (*The Inventory, or the Great Work on Surgery*, 1363), which quite influential in late medieval Europe.

In Europe, the Plague of 1348-51 was often referred to as simply the Pest, the Pestilence, or the Great Mortality, as here. Muslims called it "The Year of Annihilation."

Below, de Chauliac considers the historical and cultural effects of the Plague, as well as some putative cures.



Guy de Chauliac with two assistants, attending to an elbow dislocation; another patient waits outside. From a 15th c. surgical manuscript (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, Mss. Fr. 396)

Therefore the said mortality began for us [in Avignon, when I was in the service of Pope Clement VI] in the month of January 1348, and lasted seven months. And it took two forms: the first lasted two months, accompanied by continuous fever and a spitting up of blood, and one died within three days. The second lasted the rest of the time, also accompanied by continuous fever and by apostemes [tumors] and antraci [carbuncles] on the external parts, principally under the armpits and in the groin, and one died within five days. And the mortality was so contagious, especially in those who were spitting up blood, that not only did one get it from another by living together, but also by looking at each other, to the point that people died without servants and were buried without priests. The father did not visit his son, nor the son his father; charity was dead, hope crushed.

And I call the mortality great because it overtook the whole world, or nearly all of it. But it began in the East, and like shooting arrows it passed through us on its way west. And it was so great, that it hardly left a quarter of the human race. And it was unheard of, because we only read of the mortality in the cities of Trace and Palestine in the *Book of Epidemics* written in the time of Hippocrates [ca. 460-377 BCE], and of the mortality that afflicted the Roman subjects in the book, *De Epidemia*, in the time of Galen [ca. 129-216 CE], and of the mortality in the city of Rome in the time of [Pope] Gregory [the Great, 590-604 CE]. And none was as great as this one, because those others only attacked a single region, [but] this the whole world. Those others were curable in some way; this in none. For the mortality rendered doctors useless and put them to shame, because they did not dare visit the sick out of the fear of being infected. And when they did visit them, they could do little for them and were paid nothing. For all who got sick died, except for a few toward the end, who escaped when their buboes ripened.

Many were uncertain about the cause of this great mortality. In some places, they believed that the Jews had poisoned the world, and so they killed them. In some other areas, that it was a deformity of the poor, and they chased them out; in others, that it was the nobles, and so they [the nobles] hesitated to go out into the world. Finally, it reached the point where guards were posted in cities and towns, and they permitted no one to enter, unless he was well known. And if they found anyone with powders or unguents, they made him swallow them, fearing that these might be poisons.

Regardless of what people might say, the truth was that the cause of this mortality was twofold: one, a universal active cause, the other a particular, passive one....[Chauliac describes the universal cause as the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars on March 24, 1345.] For [the conjunction] made such an impression upon the air and the other elements that, just as a magnet moves iron, so it changed the thick humors [of the body] into something scorched and venomous, and shepherded them into the interior. And it made apostemes, from which followed continuous fevers and a spitting up of blood in the early stages, when the corrupted blood was strong and disturbed the body's constitution. And afterwards, when the constitution was in remission, it was not so greatly disturbed, and it expelled [the corrupt humors] as well as it could to the external parts, especially to the armpits and the groin. And this caused buboes and other apostemes, so that the exterior apostemes were the effect of interior apostemes. The particular, passive cause was the body's disposition, such as if it was full of evil humors, if it was weak, or bunged up [obstructed]. And for this reason it was the common people, the laborers, and those who lived evil lives who died.

Concerning cures, there was an effort [to find] a preservative before the advent of symptoms and a cure for when symptoms had arrived. For preservation, there was nothing better than to flee the area before it was infected and to purge oneself with pills of aloe and reduce the blood through a phlebotomy, purify the air with a fire, and comfort the heart with a theriac and fruits and sweet-smelling things, to console the humors with Armenian bole, and to halt corruption with sour-tasting things.

For a cure, there are phlebotomies and purgatives [probably vomit-inducing substances or laxatives] and electuaries and syrupy cordials. And the external apostemes were ripened with figs and onions that were cooked and ground up and mixed with leavened bread dough and butter. Afterwards the apostemes would open and they were healed with a treatment for ulcers. The antraci [carbuncles] were ventosed [i.e., a cupping-glass applied], scarified [i.e., cut open], and cauterized.

And I, in order to avoid a bad reputation, did not dare depart [from Avignon], but with a continuous fear I preserved myself as best I could with the aforesaid remedies. Nonetheless, toward the end of the mortality, I fell into a continuous fever, with an aposteme on the groin, and I was sick for nearly six weeks. And I was in such great danger that all of my friends believed that I would die. And the aposteme ripened and healed, as I have described above, [and] I escaped by God's command.

For further reference

Latin edition: *Guigo De Caulhiaco, Inventarium Sive Chirurgia Magna*, Ed. Michael R. McVaugh and Margrete S. Ogden. (Brill 1997)

English translation: Leonard D. Rosenman, *The Major Surgery of Guy de Chauliac* (Xlibris, 2007)