



Sir Thomas Browne and the Plague

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Received: July 2, 2020
Accepted: July 9, 2020
Published: July 31, 2020

Citation: M. Pfister (2020)
Sir Thomas Browne and the
Plague. *Jems. Special Issue:
Plagues in Early Modern
Europe*. pp. 1-7. DOI: [10.13128/
JEMS-2279-7149-11931](https://doi.org/10.13128/JEMS-2279-7149-11931)

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Data Availability Statement:
All relevant data are within the
paper and its Supporting Infor-
mation files.

Competing Interests: The
Author(s) declare(s) no conflict
of interest.

Editors: D. Pallotti, P. Pugliatti
(University of Florence)

Abstract

Sir Thomas Browne's little treatise is here published for the first time in an annotated version. It offers illuminating insights in how a prominent practicing physician and scholar from Norwich reacts to the plague hitting England in Early Modern times and the small help the medical knowledge about the plague from Paracelsus to Browne, which he examines with great learning.

Keywords: *Hippocrates, Medicine, Plague, Theory and Practice*

The author of this little treatise *De peste* I am unearthing here for a special issue of the *Journal of Early Modern Studies* dedicated, in Corona or Covid-19 times, to *Plagues in Early Modern Europe*, had first-hand medical experience of the plague. As a student of medicine on his academic grand tour, Sir Thomas Browne had reached Padua in the second half of 1632 to find the famous alma mater still under the devastating impact of the bubonic plague, its scientific staff and activities sadly reduced and in the throes of a heated debate about 'the plague's final cause or ultimate purpose' (Barbour 2016, 149), i.e., theologically, as divine punishment of evil, or, scientifically, as nature's perpetual cycles of generation and corruption, in the wake of Pietro Pomponazzi's provocatively materialist natural philosophy and Giovanni Imperiali's theologically more conciliatory deliberations on the plague in his *Pestis Anni MDCXXX Historico-Medica* (1631). Then, already long-settled as the town's physician at Norwich, the Great Plague of London of 1665-66, its enormous death-toll recorded so memorably in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722 in the wake of fears that the plague at Marseille might spread to England, reached his own town in September 1665 and required his medical attention. There is only one document which refers to this directly, a letter of his to his son Edward, following in his medical footsteps, of 22 September: 'The sickness wch God withheld from us is now in Norwich. I intend to send your sisters to Claxton [8,5 miles from Norwich], & if it encreathes to remove 3 or 4 miles of, where I may be serviceable upon occasion to my

friends in other diseases' (Browne 1964a, 28; see also Barbour 2016, 376). Obviously, Browne was in a quandary here: having little trust in the plague antidotes discussed and experimented with since antiquity, he did not rush to patients' bedsides but sought salvation in distancing or separating the still sane from the diseased; on the other hand, his professional ethos of responsibility for the patients in his trust urged him to not abandon them altogether and protect his own state of health in order to be able to come to their assistance where he might be of any avail.¹

Though we – or at least I for one – do not know exactly when Browne composed his treatise *De peste*, it was clearly not under the immediate pressure of this critical situation but somewhat later. His text remained in manuscript among his unpublished writings that entered the Hans Sloane collection of the British Museum (MS. Sloane 1827, ff. 44–48) after Sloane's death in 1753 as an important founding nucleus of the library's holdings. From there it has been published twice so far in the context of (more or less) complete editions of Browne's works: *Sir Thomas Browne's Works, including his life and correspondence*, edited by Simon Wilkin (1835/1836, 277–280) and *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (1964b, 249–252). The text I reprint and annotate here is based on both editions. A definitive version is forthcoming in eight volumes, edited by Claire Preston *et al.* (*The Complete Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, Oxford University Press), of which, however, no volume has been published so far.

De peste is vintage Browne and demonstrates all the qualities that keep his texts alive well beyond the vanishing usefulness and applicability of the scholarship they rehearse. It is telling as much in what it omits – any first-hand exposition of his medical practice, any heart-wrenching description of the wide-spread and desperate suffering, any theological reflection on theodicy in the face of such suffering, as one might expect it from the author of *Religio Medici*, or any moral and social critique of a society that has not merited better – as in the way Browne actually approaches his theme. Instead of rushing to bedsides or hospitals, he turns right away to his well-stocked library and hastens through its labyrinthine shelves of books ancient and modern to find enlightenment there. The authorities he questions, however, all leave him high and dry: from Kircherius back to Hippocrates and the Egyptians via Galen and Rota more questions are raised than answers given. This begins with the *ur*-scene of medicine's engagement with the plague, Hippocrates' famous victory over the plague in Athens, prominently staged in Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* as a heroic, Herculean task. Only, the great historian does not tell us *how* the greatest of physicians won this war. Nor do his disciples and followers, whom Browne recites, and thus we end up in a void, until Browne digs up a prescription in the works of Actuarius, an arcane late Greek-Byzantine court physician. From this work Browne quotes in its entirety the concoction prescribed, although he seems to have little faith in its authenticity and confidence in its efficacy – so little indeed that he makes no attempt at either testing it in practice or comparing it with other known strategies to combat the plague by antidotes, perfumes, fumigation, protective masks, increased personal hygiene or quarantine. What we end up with cannot but remind us of our present situation, in which the current luminaries in virology, epidemiology, infectiology, etc., are visibly taxed by the general urgent demand on them for scientific guidance in this pandemic, which their disciplines are far from capable of satisfying with indubitable authority. We are inclined to bemoan with him, and with Petrarch, 'the pestilential incompetence' of medicine (Petarca 2003, II, 77).

No wonder then that Browne's interrogative text ends on an interrogative note: not with affirmations or practical advice, but with a long and circumstantial enumeration of wide-roaming questions.

¹ For the historical context see Slack 1990; Gilman 2009 and 2010.

DE PESTE

The learned Kircherius in his booke *de peste*, cap. 7,² particularly delivers what medicines Hippocrates made use of in the great plague of Athens & particularly mentions sulphur, pich, salt, barks and vipers, as may be seen in that tract; which being not to be found in the works of Hippocrates,³ the question is, what is to be said herein.

S[i]r, when I had read the seventh chapter of Kircherius above mentioned I found it very singular, nor could I confirme it by any ancient Author, and since upon enquire I found his owne expression true that they are *parum cognita* [too little known]⁴ for I meet not therewith in any Author which might most probably mention the same; not in Hippocrates, Galen, Ætius, Ægineta, Massarias, Jordanus & others who have particularly writ *de peste*; not in Paulinus⁵ who hath largely commented upon the narration of Thucydides concerning the plague of Athens.⁶ Not in Nardius or any comment on Lucretius,⁷ where hee makes a large description of this plague, conceived to be the same wherein Hippocrates exercised this cure.

Franciscus Rota a learned Italian⁸ having read in Marini,⁹ an eminent poet of Italie, that Averrhoes¹⁰ was putt to death by the cruell death of the wheele, consulted many learned men in Europe where such a passage might be found in any other writer, and none could satisfie his question. Butt this learned author [Kircherius]¹¹ yet living is able to afford a resolution & may probably do it in following editions of this or some other work which he shall hereafter publish, though hee hath not performed it in his *Mundus subterraneus* (1664), wherein hee largely discourseth upon sulphur.

Meanwhile, referring unto further enquire, this account may be taken from some unusual manuscript, from some ancient comment of Hippocrates or some work ascribed unto him or his successors, knowne only to some libraries, or else from some Arabick writers, the Arabians being very carefull to preserve the workes of ancient Greekes wch they often translated, or sometimes fathered other works upon the best of them wch are now very rare and quite lost among us.

Now although the whole relation be allowed & the remedies to be approved, yet whether these were the secrets if Hippocrates in the plague of Athens or whether they were so succesfull in that pestilence, some doubt may be allowed, for Thucydides¹² who passed the same disease, affirmeth, That there was no remedy (probably meaning inward) that did any good, butt that wch did profit one did hurt another – *nec ullum prorsus remedium repertum est quod adhibendum prodesset; nullumque corpus, sive firmæ sive infirmæ valetudinis esset, tanti mali violentiæ*

² The German and Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), one of the greatest polymaths of his time, had occasion to study the 1656 bubonic plague in Italy at close quarters from his study in the 'Collegium Romanum' and was one of the very first to look at it with a microscope, discovering 'invisible little worms' (*animalcules*) infesting the patients. See Kircher 1658; see also Glassie 2020.

³ I.e. it is not extant in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*.

⁴ All translations are by the present editor of Browne's *De peste*.

⁵ Fabius Paulinus: born in Udine 1535, philosopher, philologist and physician in Padua and Venice; his *Commentaria in Thucydidis Historiam, seu Narrationem de Peste* appeared in Venice in 1603.

⁶ *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.48-55.

⁷ See Lucretius' account of the plague in Athens in *De rerum natura*, VI, 1138ff.

⁸ Giovanni Francesco Rota, anatomist and surgeon in Bologna (ca. 1520-1558), author of *Commentarius sane in Galeni librum primum de compositione medicamentorum per genera* (1553).

⁹ Giambattista Marino (1569-1625) in his *Dicerie sacre* (1614).

¹⁰ Arab-Andalusian philosopher, physician, medical encyclopedist and polymath (1126-1198).

¹¹ A marginal note refers to Kircher's *Scrutinum physico-medicum* (1658, ch. VII, section III).

¹² A marginal note refers to *Hist.* 2, 51 (*History of the Peloponnesian War*).

resistere potuit; sed omnia absumpsit. [and there was no remedy at all which would have served when applied, and no body, be it in robust or feeble health, would have been able to resist the violence of such a powerful evil – no, it would have been carried away by it.] From wch discription some doubt may arise whether Hippocrates came not to Athens in the declination rather than the raging time of the disease.

Galen *de Theriaca ad Pisonem*¹³ ascribeth the cure of Hippocrates only unto his Fires: *Vehementer laudo admirandum Hippocratem, quod pestem illam quae ex Aethiopia Graecos invasit non alia ratione curavati quam aerem immutans. Jussit igitur per totam civitatem accendi ignem qui non simplicem incendii materiam haberet sed coronas et flores odore fragrantissimos. Haec consuluit ad ignem alendum et ipsi etiam inspergere unguenta delibata et suavissimi odores.* [I praise the admirable Hippocrates for having managed to cure the plague, which had invaded Greece from Ethiopia, by solely changing the air and with the people who breathed it. He ordered to light fires throughout the city and demanded that the fires should not be of simple wood but nourished by perfumed wreaths and flowers, soaked in the richest and sweetest juices.]¹⁴ And the same course they putt in practice at Venice in the great plague which happened under Duke Foscaro about 2 hundred years ago.¹⁵

Agayne, if this account of the cure of Hippocrates set down by Kircherius bee ancient, and in times when it might have best been knowne, some wonder it is how it escaped the pen of Galen, a superlative admirer of him, and who had opportunity to knowe what elder times had delivered on this subject;¹⁶ for Thessalus the sonne of Hippocrates had left expositions upon his Epidemicks. Lycus, Sabinus, Satyrus and Quintus the preceptors of Galen had also left tracts upon the narration of Thucydides, and Galen himself had writ a discourse upon the same as he testifies in his work *περί δυσπνοίας* [On Shortness of Breath].

Actuarius, an Author of good esteeme & who writt many hundred years ago,¹⁷ undertakes to set down Hippocrates his Antidote, wch hee used agaynst the plague, wch he believed to be this: R Calami aromatici, Junci odorati, sabinae an. 3 iii, cardamomi, Cyperi, Crocomagmatis an. 3 v, nardi Celticae lib. 5, Asphalati 3 vii, Cupressi Ros, an. 3 iiiii, Ladani myrrhae Thuris an. lib. I, bac. Junip. 40, Mastick 3 iiiii, Nardi spicae lib. 5 costi 3 iii folg. 3 viii, Casiae lib. 5, Amomi 3 iii Styrcis 3x, Terebinthinae lib. 3, Mellis Attici lib. 5 vini veteris q.s.¹⁸ This hee affirmeth to bee the same wch hee used at the plague of Athens *et cuius causa coronatus fuit* [and the employment of which was crowned by success]. This, however learned by him, is admitted by Massarias and others & is very different medicine from those so highly commended by Kircherius, who in all equity is obliged to make use of some author of equall credit and authority with him. Now while I discourse of this obscuritie some others arise which I cannot omitt to propound onto you, particularly why Hippocrates left no distinct description of his plague together with his remedies? Why Thucydides in his large description of the plague of Athens makes no mention of Hippocrates? and may also consider that his cure of the plague by fires, and even in Athens itself, was elder then Hippocrates, and practis'd by Acron Agrigentius as testified by Plinie,

¹³ Galenos of Pergamon (ca. 130-200 A.D.) summed up the medical knowledge of his time; his *De theriaca ad Pisonem* discussed the antidotes at the disposal of doctors.

¹⁴ On corona plants, see also Browne's 'Of Garlands and Coronary or Garland-Plants' (1964c, 49-52).

¹⁵ Browne may have in mind Francesco Foscaro, whose sons were killed by the plague of 1425-27.

¹⁶ It is for this that Browne includes in his *Museum Clausum* (Item 1, 18) 'A Commentary of Galen upon the Plague of Athens described by Thucydides' (1683, 199).

¹⁷ Johannes Zacharias Actuarius (13th-14th century), last Greek-Byzantine court physician and author of a nine-volume work *De urinis* and uroscopia.

¹⁸ To translate this into modern English goes well beyond the present editor's pharmacological knowledge.

Ætius, Paulus, & also made use of by Jachen the Ægyptian physitian who lived in the dayes of Senye, King of Ægypt, as is delivered by Suidas,¹⁹ and the practice afterward of the Ægyptian priests to kindle their fire at the tomb of Jachem, & so to diffuse it through the citty; and what is delivered by Plutarch concerning Ægyptian Priests, *de nocte soliti consurgere et inquinatum aerem odoratis incendiis purgare* [they would nightly meet and purge the bad air with perfumed fires],²⁰ to omit their purifying fumes of the great and lesser *cuphy*, or odorate compositions, containing 28 and 36 ingredients, wch they used in their dayly sacrifices to the sunne & moon. Butt before I dismiss you I shall not omit to entertaine you with a few other Queries whereof perhaps you have not taken much/strict notice:

An pestis sit ex lege naturae? ut dubitat Cardanus; id est ne terra hominum numero non sufficere.

[Whether the plague derives from a law of nature? Which Cardanus puts in doubt as the number of people on earth is not sufficient for that.]

An detur pestis Artificialis, uti fertur de pulvere et unguento pestifero in peste Mediolanensi.

[Whether one can speak of an artificial plague, as argued for the plague in Milan,²¹ which allegedly was induced by a powder and a pestiferous ointment?]

An pisces sint a peste immunes.

[Whether fish are immune against the plague?]

An ignis sit maxima pesti pestis.

[Whether fire be the strongest antidote or plague against the plague?]

An pestis fuerit ante diluuium.

[Whether the plague existed already before the deluge?]

An a mundo condito plures occiderit pestis an gladius.

[Whether since the creation of the world more people have been killed by the plague than by war?]

An Atomæ pestiferi sint Animalia, ut vult Kircherus.

[Whether the pestiferous atoms are tiny animals as Kircherus maintains?]

An dentur Temperamenta aloimodea pesti parum aut nihil subdita.

[Whether aloimodea [*unidentifiable word*] temperaments are little, or not at all, prone to the plague?]

Cur inter maximas Europæ urbes pestis Lutetiæ minus grassetur.

[Why among the greatest towns of Europe Paris is the least visited by the plague?]

Cur pestis sudoribus optime discutiat, cur detur pestis sudatoria, ut sudor Anglicus.

[Why the plague is spread best through sweat, so that it is called the sweating plague, as in the expression 'the English sweating sickness'?]

An pestis sit perpetuo ambulatoria et numquam ubique extincta.

[Whether the plague is constantly moving about and never and nowhere ever totally eradicated?]

An ubicunque grassetur pestis, quatuor tempora, id est, principii incrementi status et declinationis, manifeste absolvet.

[Whether, wherever the plague rages, it manifestly always runs through four phases, i.e. its outburst, growth, climax and abatement?]

An non æque mirum sit quomodo desinat quam quomodo inciperit pestis.

[Whether the end of a plague comes as much as a surprise as its beginning?]

¹⁹ Suidas is a legendary byzantine geographer and author of a twelfth-century encyclopedia with the author's name as title suggesting 'fortress' – indeed a storehouse of long-forgotten knowledge.

²⁰ Browne has a marginal note here to the source, Plutarch *de Iside et Osyris*.

²¹ Browne has in mind the great plague at Milan in 1630, commemorated in Alessandro Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi* (1825-26).

Cur in peste Hebraica nulla fiat mentio de separatione sanorum ab infectis, quae tamen specialiter notatur in lepra.

[Why was in accounts of the Hebrew plague the separation of the healthy from the diseased never mentioned, whereas it was quite explicitly in the case of leprosy?]

Unde verbum plague, emphatice pestem significans apud Anglos.

[Whence derives the word 'plague' used by the English with its emphatic meaning 'pest'?]

An musica conferat in sananda peste. Questio oritur a praxi Thaletis Cretensis qui pestem Spartanum musica curasse dicitur. Plutarch.

[Whether music contributes to healing the plague? The question rises from Plutarch mentioning that the Cretan Thales had healed the plague in Sparta with music.]²²

An qui carbunculis et bubonibus liberantur a peste, sanantur simul a lue venerea.

[Whether those who are liberated from the plague by carbuncles and bubos breaking up are healed at the same time of venereal diseases?]

An quis variolis et peste simul laboret.

[Whether anyone can suffer from smallpox and plague at the same time?]²³

An aeri infecto purgando sulphurata non praestent aromaticis; quibus tamen maxime secundum Galenum usus est Hippocrates?

[Whether in purging the pestilent air sulphur is not more efficient than aromatic substances – although Hippocrates, according to Galen, employed particularly the latter?]

An balsamum sulphuris non sit addendum Theriacis.

[Whether one should not add sulphuric balm to the antidotes?]

An alexipharmacis absque opio compositis sit minus fidendum.

[Whether one should put less trust in antidotes concocted without opium?]²⁴

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²² See Plutarch, *Moralia*, 78.

²³ This question concerned Browne quite personally: during the smallpox epidemic raging in Norwich in 1681-82 he wondered whether his son Edward, who had recovered from the Great Plague of 1665-66, would be immune to smallpox; see Barbour and Preston, 2008, 290.

²⁴ I wish to thank my friend Michael Kardamitsis and Dr. Thomas Poiss for checking my little Latin and less Greek and Prof. Marielisa Rossi for her bibliographical help.

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