
**Reviewed by** Neil Murphy (Northumbria University)

**Published on** H-Sci-Med-Tech (June, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Lori Jones’s *Patterns of Plague: Changing Ideas about Plague in England and France, 1348–1750* is a welcome addition to the historiography of plague, the disease which ravaged Europe between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. In contrast to many previous studies of the disease, which often focus on a single location or a single outbreak of plague—and frequently both—Jones’s work covers four centuries and two countries. Moreover, where historians tend to split into chronological camps, with medievalists looking at the Black Death of the fourteenth century and early modernists picking up the story in the sixteenth century, *Patterns of Plague* is one of the rare studies to cut across this traditional divide—and rightly so, as plague, of course, recognizes neither political borders nor historical periodization.

Jones examines around 250 plague tracts, the genre of medical writing which emerged with the Black Death and persisted in western Europe through the eighteenth century. While European societies changed in fundamental ways during these centuries, the principal aspects of the medical advice these treatises offered largely remained static. This has produced an often rather negative view of these sources as perpetuating the same unoriginal and ultimately unhelpful medical advice. Certainly, plague tracts are not new to historians and there are many fine studies of the medical advice contained in these documents (most recently, John Aberth’s *Doctoring the Black Death: Medieval Europe’s Medical Response to Plague*, 2021). Yet Jones shows that plague tracts were more than just medical texts and that they cast new light on the social, cultural, and intellectual responses to plague in premodern Europe. In moving away from a medical interpretation of the disease, the book reveals beliefs about how plague arose and spread. Each plague tract was a product of its local environment, and if the core medical advice remained largely static, other important aspects of the texts changed considerably depending on location and time. Focusing on the cultural, social, and intellectual contexts of plague tracts allows Jones to show how the major developments
of the time impacted contemporary understandings of the disease. For instance, the recovery of ancient texts during the Renaissance led to new, historically informed understandings of the development of plague. As well as widening the chronological and geographical scope of the disease, by the sixteenth century plagues tracts were also increasingly relating the malady to other threats to society, such as the growth in poverty, the appearance of new diseases such as syphilis, confessional politics, and the wider threat that the expansion of the Ottoman Empire posed to Christian Europe.

After a substantial introduction that helpfully sets out the current state of our understanding of the disease, the book provides five key chapters analyzing different aspects of the texts. The first chapter begins with the earliest known French plague tract, Pierre de Damouzy’s *Tractatus de epydemia*, produced at Reims in 1348. This provides a stepping board to examine the standard tripartite form of these texts, which lasted through to the eighteenth century. If the standard medical guidance issued in plague tracts remained similar, nonetheless, as this chapter highlights, subtle changes occurred over time, such as the increasing focus on firsthand experience and direct observation, which came to replace the medieval emphasis for physicians on book learning alone. Chapter 2 moves on to look at the material conditions in which plague texts were produced, accounting for the impact of major developments such as the invention of the printing press not only on the production and reception of the texts but also on more localized contexts, showing how the place of publication—or even the individual printing house or form of the text—could affect how an individual tract was valued. Chapter 3 considers how the authors of plague tracts, especially from the sixteenth century, historicized the progress of the disease. In giving plague a history, Jones shows that authors fashioned a past for the disease that was directly related to the wider conditions of the era in which they were living. Chapter 4 moves on from time to look at space, showing that the authors of plague tracts understood how the disease spread from person to person and from place to place, and that these understandings of space both changed over time and depended on where the author was based, with there being key cross-Channel differences in this respect. In chapter 5, Jones develops this focus on space to show that by the seventeenth century plague—like so many of the ills affecting Christian Europe—was believed to come from the Ottoman Empire. In this way, the fears of early modern European Christians led the disease to become orientalized—a view which persisted right through the eighteenth century. The book concludes with a useful overview as well as some nods to the future direction work on plague treatises could take. Overall, this is a valuable book that uses old texts in stimulating new ways.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58175

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.