

Pestilence, War, and Famine
Forerunners of Death

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The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in Western Europe were a chaotic time. The waging of war and the lingering effects of disease and famine were interminable matters that affected the mental outlook of the population. This paper will examine the symbolic meaning of the riders depicted in Albrecht Dürer's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and how those representations could be seen as metaphors for certain events during that period. The subject of Dürer's work was inspired by the opening verses of the sixth chapter of the Book of Revelation in which St. John describes a vision he experienced.

The first of four mounted riders is carrying a bow and is the representation of pestilence. Renaissance Europe had seen "recurring plagues ever since the Black Death of 1348" and the "ultimate horror of death [was a] constant thematic concern" (Sayre 553). A large amount of the people of Europe had died as a result of plague and perhaps was seen most dramatically in the reduction of Rome's population from "around 1 million ... to under 20,000" (Sayre 495).

The second horseman is shown wielding a sword and is the embodiment of war. The rogue army of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, sacked Rome in 1527 and the city of Vienna was the target of a siege by Sultan Suleiman I. Unlike in Rome, the Turks eventually abandoned their siege and left Vienna after failing to "subdue the city after repeated attacks" (Sayre 561). Martin Luther referred to the Turks as "the rod of God's wrath [by which] God is punishing the world" (Sayre 562). Death is an ever present companion to open warfare and siege.

The third mount carries the personification of famine which is holding empty scales. Sayre doesn't mention famine in his text, but it is widely considered that the collapse of the grain markets and the reduction in crop yields brought on by climate change led to the subsequent scarcity of food. Population growth had exceeded the capacity of food production during the

fourteenth century. The effects were less immediate and tended to have been of longer duration than either war or disease, nevertheless many people starved to death as a result.

The final character – and the only one named in scripture – is the rider borne by a pale horse, Death. The Catholic Church was being threatened from the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther wrote that God’s wrath was present and that Judgement Day was imminent. “For both, the Apocalypse seemed at hand” (Sayre 562). The presence of death at the hands of the earlier travelers in Dürer’s art was evident and a persistent result of the other phenomenons.

The events of those centuries were constant reminders of the tenuousness of life. The periodic outbreaks of plague and the effects of pestilence, war, and famine led to death for many – and hardship for most – of those touched by unwelcome circumstances. The biblical Apocalypse would have appeared to have been knocking at the door of Western Europe.

Works Cited (Bibliography)

Sayre, Henry M. *The Humanities. Culture, Continuity and Change*. Book 3. Saddle Rock, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2012. Print.