

# Can There Ever Be Clueless Advice Books?

## Remarks on Plague Tracts

*Stefan Laube*

### 1 500 Years Ago: an Example from the Middle of Germany

'Eine Unterweisung wie man sich zu der Zeit der Pestilentz verhalten soll' [Instruction how to behave at the time of the plague] is the title of an anonymous tract that left the press of a Leipzig printing workshop at the beginning of April 1521.<sup>1</sup> There is now no doubt about the authorship of Ulrich Rülein von Calw. With him, we have before us an all-round personality such as only the Renaissance could produce. Rülein was a physician, mathematician, mining engineer and mayor.<sup>2</sup> As a town planner, he played a major role in the founding of Annaberg in the Ore Mountains [Erzgebirge]. As author of the *Bergbüchlein* he is well known for the world's first non-fiction book on mining, which first appeared around 1505.<sup>3</sup> Sixteen years later, Rülein is active as the author of a pestilential treatise.

The plague is a modern epidemic, its spread the result of extensive trade relations in the Eurasian region. What today are Far Eastern business travelers in Europe were then sailors returning from the Crimea on Genoese merchant ships. The transmission route was millions of times from the rat via the flea to

1 Facsimile of this document at Wilhelm Pieper, *Ulrich Rülein von Calw und sein Bergbüchlein* (Berlin: Akademie, 1955), pp. 55–61.

2 Gundolf Keil, "ein kleiner Leonardo". Ulrich Rülein von Kalbe als Humanist, Mathematiker, Montanwissenschaftler und Arzt', in Gundolf Keil (ed.), *Würzburger Fachprosa-Studien. Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Medizin-, Pharmazie- und Standesgeschichte aus dem Würzburger medizinhistorischen Institut* (Würzburg: Königshausen&Neumann, 1995), pp. 228–247; see also Carlo Cipolla, *Public Health and the Medical Profession in the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

3 It was still attested 'a great literary interest' by mining engineer Herbert Hoover – who was to be elected the 31st president of the USA in 1929 – when he translated and commented on Georg Agricola's *De re metallica* together with his wife, the accomplished geologist Lou Henry. Herbert C. Hoover and Lou H. Hoover (eds. and transl.), *Georgius Agricola, De re metallica* (London: Salisbury House, 1912), p. 60.

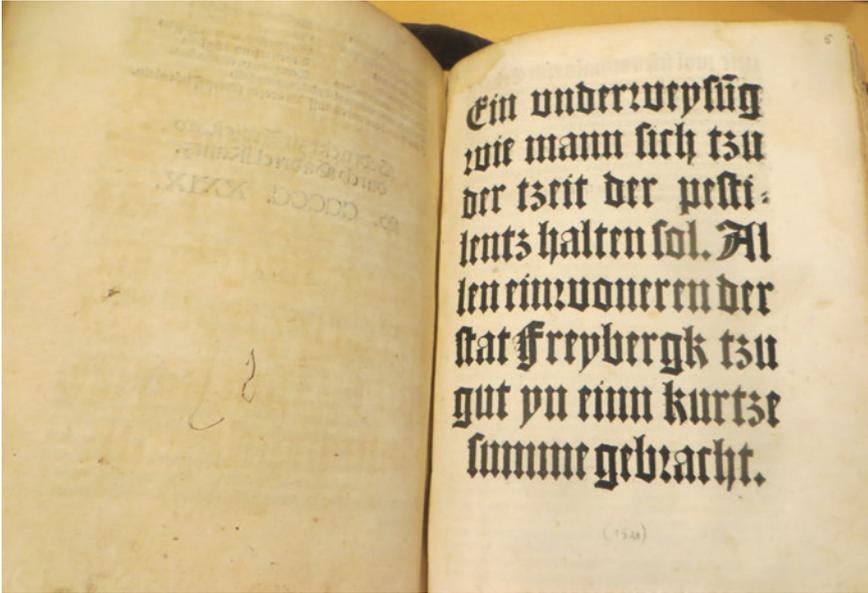


FIGURE 1.1 [Ulrich Rülein van Calw], Ein Unterwysung wie man sich tzu der Tzeit der Pestilents halten sol Allen einwoneren der stat Freybergk tzu gut yn einn kurtze summe gebracht (Leipzig: Schumann, 1521), Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, N 96.40 Helmst. (5)

FOTO: STEFAN LAUBE

the human being.<sup>4</sup> After the pandemic in the mid-fourteenth century, which, according to estimates, claimed the lives of a third of the European population, the Black Death became endemic. In local epidemics, the plague broke out at almost regular intervals over the next three centuries. In 1521, it reached Freiberg at the foot of the Ore Mountains.<sup>5</sup>

There was no therapy, but there were rules of conduct.<sup>6</sup> The advice given in Rülein von Calw's plague treatise shows the helplessness of the medical profession, which adhered to the four-fluid doctrine, in the face of the plague. Since Hippocrates, diseases were considered as disturbances in the mixing

4 It was not until 1894 that the Swiss physician Alexandre Yersin succeeded in isolating the plague bacterium and identifying the route of transmission.

5 Stefan Monecke, Hannelore Monecke and Jochen Monecke, 'Die Pest in Freiberg 1613–1614', *Mitteilungen des Freiburger Altertumsvereins*, 100 (2007), pp. 139–169.

6 Gerhard F. Strasser, 'Niemals nüchter und niemals voll tut in Sterbens-Läufften wohl'. Der Stellenwert der Affekte in der Pest-Prophylaxe nach 1348' in Johann Anselm Steiger (ed.), *Passion, Affekt und Leidenschaft in der frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 1079–1089.

ratio of the humors (blood, phlegm, green and black bile). This concept was maintained for over 2,000 years, so that even in the eighteenth century scabies was still interpreted as a disorder of the body juices, even though its causative agent, a mite, could be seen with the naked eye. Other theories pointing to the future, such as that of the Italian physician Girolamo Fracastoro of the small, contagious pathogens (1546), failed to gain acceptance, which made it difficult for a long time to introduce defense strategies against infectious diseases.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the tradition going back to Hippocrates and Galen, Rülein gives a series of dietary recommendations and lifestyle advice (A good clear beer is more useful to drink than a strong wine. He who sleeps at night should not sleep during the day), which are supposed to restore the balance of the juices, but which are completely ineffective in the face of the plague. For therapy, bloodletting (the vein closest to the ulcer) and then a little juice from a pomegranate are given. Apple juice, theriac (a universal antidote) or 'mercurium precipitatum' can also be administered. In addition, there were plague barbers who also cut plague bumps. Until the introduction of antibiotics, this was the only possibility of therapy, had a pain-relieving effect and could actually lead to a cure, if the pathogen did not spread in the blood as a result of the procedure.

According to the mayor of Freiberg 'temporal flight' was the best remedy in the event of an outbreak of the plague. For all those who do not want to leave their stores, Rülein recommends moderate eating and drinking. In particular, it is important to avoid bloody food. The fact that food should be made a little sour with vinegar is certainly still a sensible measure for reducing infection today. It seems like today's anti-COVID appeals when Rülein urges people to avoid large gatherings of people. In addition, dwellings should be kept free of any stench, preferably with the help of frankincense, myrrh and juniper. In places where large numbers of people congregate, such as churches and bathhouses, incense should be burned. In general, open fires help against putrefaction in the air. Everything that comes from the sick person, such as breath, sweat, excrement and urine is harmful, as well as the clothes of the sick person, his bedding and other intimate things. Probably without this good

<sup>7</sup> Karl-Heinz Leven, *Die Geschichte der Infektionskrankheiten. Von der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, (Landsberg: ecomed, 1997), pp. 33–39; Benjamin Wallura, 'About what is Right in Times of Plague. Contagious Debates in Philosophy, Medicine, Law, and Theology at the University of Helmstedt, 1681–83' in Peter Hess (ed.), *Managing Pandemics in Early Modern Germany*, Spektrum. Publications of the German Studies Association (New York: Bergahn Books [to be published in 2024]).

advice, more than 2,000 plague victims would have died in Freiberg.<sup>8</sup> In the appendix, Rülein does not fail to point out that mercy should be shown to the sick, even if they lose their senses. Stinginess in the crisis was not his thing: the authorities should reward the nurses ‘abundantly’, because: ‘One does not have to kiss the penny so often in the hard times as the money fools tend to do at other times’.<sup>9</sup>

## 2 Then and Nowadays

Today, our understanding of the plague and other contagious diseases has since been shaped by the explanatory model of bacteriology.<sup>10</sup> Crucial to this is the idea that there is a very specific cause of this plague that can be determined with certainty, defined by precisely this pathogen.<sup>11</sup> If it is not detectable, then it is not that disease. In the media, this has been visualised in the COVID period by the omnipresent image of the model of a spiky virus. Whether or not the virus looks anything like that under an electron microscope is secondary. Rather, it is always about satisfying the thirst for knowledge and imagination, which is directed at something that is not visible at all.<sup>12</sup>

The plague of the pre-modern era was miasma, the result of negative planetary constellations, it was dyscrasia, poison, supposedly thrown into the wells by Jews, the work of evil in the world and divine punishment. Physicians mostly followed the ancient teachings of Galen and Hippocrates and thus a humoral pathology that was not very appropriate. In the case of the plague in particular, it was assumed that there was contamination of the air by

8 The high death toll prompted the Saxon Duke Henry the Pious to designate the ‘Donatskirchhof’, located outside the city walls, as the general cemetery in his ‘Plague Ordinance’ instead of numerous burial sites within the city.

9 ‘Wann mus in der schwere tzeyt un grosse Noth den pfennigk nicht als oft kussenn als die gelt narren tzuandern Tzeyten pflegen tzu thun.’ Ulrich Rülein von Calw, *Eine Unterweisung wie man sich zu der Zeit der Pestilentz verhalten soll* (Leipzig: Schumann, 1521), nach Pieper, *Ulrich Rülein von Calw*, p. 61.

10 Flea bites transmitted the classic bubonic plague, which had an incubation period of up to six days, after which the lymph nodes quickly swelled to form the typical bumps.

11 Katharina Wolff, *Die Theorie der Seuche. Krankheitskonzepte und Pestbewältigung im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2021); Martin Dinges, ‘Neue Wege in der Seuchengeschichte? Einleitung’ in Marten Dinges and Thomas Schlich (eds.), *Neue Wege in der Seuchengeschichte* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995), pp. 7–24.

12 The bacteriologist Robert Koch also had such great success with the scientific community and later with the general public because he was able to make pathogens visible.

certain pathological vapors, pathogenic ‘miasms’.<sup>13</sup> Explanatory models from the history of medicine, which could not be more different, lead to comparable conclusions in the behavior of society: ‘what cannot be cured must be endured.’ We found ourselves in this awkward situation as members of highly technological societies for many months until research succeeded in producing effective vaccines. What a time, and with consequences for the history of media and knowledge that we can hardly foresee today, as Nils Minkmar from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* put out:

What was unique about the past few months was the global practice of scientific education. There had often been talk of an information revolution, but now it could be experienced in everyday life. Almost in sync with research, the public learned everything about pathogens, prevention, therapy, and finally vaccines. Aerosol models were studied, the paths of the virus were explained in cartoons, documentaries showed the suffering of the sick, the news reported the various waves and stages, and scientists became stars.<sup>14</sup>

In a new emergency situation, the consequences of which cannot be estimated, it is of course extremely important to be able to formulate and convey reasonably comprehensible advice, because this is the only way to create the impression of a community capable of taking action. The authority of being able to instruct something at all creates trust and brings society together. One side orders and recommends, the other side follows, complies with the advice as best it can, especially since simple measures such as wearing a mask, keeping a distance and washing hands were immediately understood by most people and were reasonably effective. The alternative would be apathetic indifference or reckless disregard.

While the implementation of instructions in itself acts like a cure in a crisis that suddenly erupts, one question does not seem to arise at all. How far

13 Gerd Schwerhoff, *Die Pest in der Frühen Neuzeit – Ein ferner Spiegel. Oder: Was lehrt uns der Blick in die Geschichte* [<https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/phil/powi/dpb/studium/lehrvorlesungen/die-pest-in-der-fruehen-neuzeit-ein-ferner-spiegel>] (accessed 8 May 2022).

14 ‘Das Einzigartige an den vergangenen Monaten war die globale Praxis der wissenschaftlichen Weiterbildung. Oft war schon von einer Informationsrevolution die Rede gewesen, nun konnte man sie im Alltag erleben. Nahezu synchron mit der Forschung erfuhr die Öffentlichkeit alles über Erreger, Prävention, Therapie, schließlich über die Impfstoffe. Aerosolmodelle wurden studiert, die Wege des Virus in Trickfilmen erklärt, Dokumentationen zeigten das Leid der Kranken, die Nachrichten meldeten die verschiedenen Wellen und Stadien, und Wissenschaftler und Wissenschaftlerinnen wurden zu Stars.’ Nils Minkmar, ‘Beibt alles anders’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 June 2021.

should the new instructions go, how long should they last? That is why people dutifully wore masks even in rather deserted pedestrian zones, like the one in Wolfenbüttel in these times, or rolled bulky shopping carts into the supermarket, even if they do not want to buy more than a bottle of milk. Or, as practiced in the Herzog August Library: books that have been borrowed are first sent into quarantine for several days! Books seem to be something like living beings after all.<sup>15</sup> And at conferences here, there are coffee breaks without coffee. Why, you may perhaps ask? This is due to the push button of the thermos, which every coffee drinker has to touch. A bon mot by cultural historian Keith Thomas may come to mind: 'If magic is to be defined as the employment of ineffective techniques to allay anxiety when effective ones are not available, then we must recognize that no society will ever be free from it.'<sup>16</sup>

'Those who don't study history are doomed to repeat it. Yet those who *do* study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while everyone else repeats it.'<sup>17</sup> Although, when it comes to lessons from history, I actually tend to follow the wisdom of a wise historian in an armchair from a cartoon in *The New Yorker*, a look at the past does not seem devoid of meaning. Such a retrospective can be motivated in different ways: we can emphasise the differences, such as wrong reactions at the time and a lack of knowledge on the part of contemporaries, in order to highlight our comparatively privileged situation.<sup>18</sup> Or we can look for familiar patterns in the past, according to the motto: That is how it was back then, that is how it always is in times of epidemics!

A comparison of the stock of images across the epochs alone brings surprising analogies to light. The FFP2 masks, sometimes pointed, may recall naturalistic beak masks with which doctors in Italy tried to protect themselves in plague times. The spiky COVID-19 virus is reminiscent of the arrows by which the plague saint St. Sebastian was pricked, iconographically immortalized a thousand times over. Both arrow and virus are prickly creatures that trigger defense in the viewer: please spare me, please do not touch me! The digital

15 The quarantining of books was a major feature of times of epidemics in the early years of public libraries in the late nineteenth century: see Gerald S. Greenberg, 'Books as Disease Carriers, 1880–1920', *Libraries & Culture*, 23 (1988), pp. 281–294. The rules of the *Coats' Public Library, Stenness, 1905* included: Books may be refused to parties dwelling in houses where infectious disease exists. I thank Andrew Pettegree for this reference.

16 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin, 1973,) p. 800.

17 Cartoon by Tom Toro, *The New Yorker*, 13 March 2017.

18 Schwerhoff, *Die Pest in der Frühen Neuzeit*; Etienne François: 'Eine Krise ohne Beispiel?' in *Corona Stories. Pandemische Entwürfe* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2020), pp. 92–122.

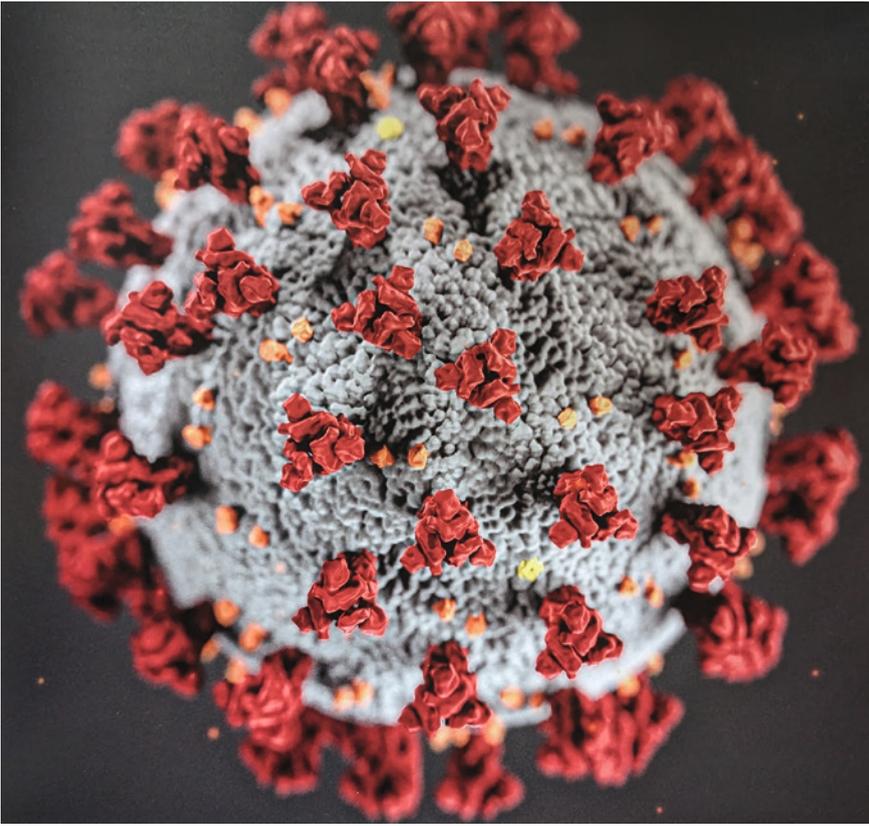


FIGURE 1.2 COVID 19-Virus, Alissa Eckert, MSMI; Dan Higgins, MAMS; Public Health Image Library, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Government, 2020, Wellcome Collection, Anna Esquivel and Julius Wiedemann (eds.), *Science Illustration. A History of Visual Knowledge from the 15th Century to Today* (Köln: Taschen, 2023), p. 313

image as developed from the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) by Allissa Eckert and Dan Higgins became the icon of the virus: gray with red antennae.

The red S proteins of the virus have been deliberately highlighted in the image, although the M proteins are more numerous. The S proteins are responsible for the spread of the virus. The visualization of bullet monsters was intended to accentuate the danger of the infection.<sup>19</sup> At the interface of popular knowledge and professional knowledge, clarity and certainty have a special significance. Fictitious pictorial constructions emerge that are not so different from illustrations the immunologist and sociologist of knowledge

<sup>19</sup> Birgit Ulrike Münch, 'Die Macht der Krankheits-Bilder. Seuchen in der Kunst', in *Forschung&Lehre* 4/21, pp. 282–284.



FIGURE 1.3 Plague in Lucches, c.1400, manuscript illumination, in Giovanni Sercambi, *Croniche*, Lucca, Archivio di Stato, MS 107, fol. 340r

Ludwik Fleck came across almost a hundred years ago.<sup>20</sup> Anyway, is it not more ‘delightful’ to receive an arrow from heavenly putti,<sup>21</sup> than to be taken away by army trucks queuing up because the local cemeteries are overcrowded?<sup>22</sup>

20 The following scene was depicted on a poster: In the immediate vicinity of a child, evil germs in the form of little devils fly out of the open mouth of a coughing person, Ludwik Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* [1935], eds. with an introduction by Lothar Schäfer and Thomas Schnelle (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 154. See also Brigitte Weinzierl, ‘Viren visualisieren: Bildgebung und Popularisierung’, in Ruth Mayer and Brigitte Weinzierl (eds.), *Virus! Mutation einer Metapher* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2004), pp. 97–131.

21 Around 1400, as an illustration of the report on the plague of 1348, a mass death appears in the chronicle of Giovanni Sercambi, an apothecary from Lucca. The dying people collapsing are hit by arrows shot by two winged demons. The disease appears as punishment, but at the same time symbolizes evil in general, see Louise Marshall, ‘God’s Executioners: Angels, Devils and the Plague in Giovanni Sercambi’s *Illustrated Chronicle* (1400)’, in Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (eds.), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 177–200.

22 See the iconic photo from Bergamo in March 2020: ‘Diese schrecklichen Bilder – wie ein junger Italiener unsere Sicht auf das Coronavirus verändert hat’ in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 May 2020; see also <https://www.zispotlight.de/frank-fehrenbach-ueber-das-bild-aus-bergamo-oder-the-common-bond-is-the-movie-theatre/> (accessed 2 May 2021); Karen Fromm, ‘Leeres Zentrum – periphere Bilder. Die visuelle Berichterstattung zur Corona-epidemie’, in Felix Koltermann (ed.), *Corona und die journalistische Bildkommunikation. Praktiken und Diskurse des Visuellen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021), pp. 55–80.



FIGURE 1.4 Army trucks remove the COVID dead in Bergamo because the local cemeteries are overcrowded

FOTO: SCREENSHOT, MARCH 2020, FOTO: EMANUELE DI TERLIZZI VIA EPA

It is not the place to overdo this comparison. As a prelude to our conference volume, I would like to take a casual look at plague tracts of the early modern period, which I hope will kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, this provides us with an extremely suitable case study for our topic of 'how-to-tracts' [Rezpte-Büchlein] and on the other hand, we can use the multifaceted nature of this exemplary genre to provide systematic clues as to what this volume of essays is about.

### 3 Books – Small and Short

With about one thousand printed texts from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, the Wolfenbüttel library holds a representative portion of early modern epidemic literature.<sup>23</sup> In addition to medical advice literature, pamphlets and calendars, theological epidemic literature, we can include regulations and decrees from towns and courts. On the title page, the authors advertise promising announcements of rapid and effective help against the deadly threat. Many plague pamphlets are characterized by their brevity, which is already strikingly apparent in the title.

‘Kurz’ and ‘klein’ for ‘brief’ and ‘little’ – these adjectives mark the wording of titles of pest tracts. Whether *Kurtze Berichte* or *Kurtze Unterweisungen*, nearly 100 relevant titles with the word ‘kurz’ can be found in the index of printed works published in the German-speaking world, the VD16 and VD17. The physician Philipp Imsser’s *PestilentzBüchlein/ Für die armen Handwercks- und Baur-Leuthe* [Little Book of Pestilence for the Poor Craftsmen and farmer people] from 1680 with the title addendum ‘Aufs kürzeste beschrieben’ [Described in the briefest possible way] was a reprint: . this simple book had first appeared in 1582. ‘Jetzt in Gegenwärtiger Gefährlichkeit’ [Now in Present Danger], during the great European plague epidemic around 1680, the ‘poor people’ who found themselves outside ‘auf Feldt und Strassen’ [in the fields and streets] could be given a simple aid.<sup>24</sup> The motto of these texts was to be comprehensible. Often the contents were arranged in such a way that they could be easily remembered.

This conference volume presents many examples of such inconspicuous, small-format treatises that often convey practical tips from individual fields of knowledge in a few dozen pages. The title often refers to ‘Nützlich büchlin’ [Useful booklet]. The term ‘Büchlein’, the German diminutive of the book seems an interesting, frequently occurring category that has not yet been seriously investigated.<sup>25</sup> By the way, what is called ‘brevety’ is relatively: the size of

23 Petra Feuerstein-Herz, ‘Im Druck der Seuchen – Seuchen und Buchdruck in der Frühen Neuzeit am Beispiel der Bestände der Herzog August Bibliothek’, in *Gotts verhängnis und seine straffe – Zur Geschichte der Seuchen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Petra Feuerstein-Herz, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 27–36.

24 Philipp Imsser: *Pestilentz Büchlein/ Für die armen Handwercks- und Baur Leuthe*. [without place] 1680.

25 Stefan Laube, ‘Wer langweilig ist der kauffe mich’. Beiläufiges zum Büchlein, in *Ephemera. Abgelegenes und Vergängliches in der Kulturgeschichte von Druck und Buch*. Festschrift für Petra Feuerstein-Herz, eds. by Hartmut Beyer and Peter Burschel (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022), pp. 115–136.

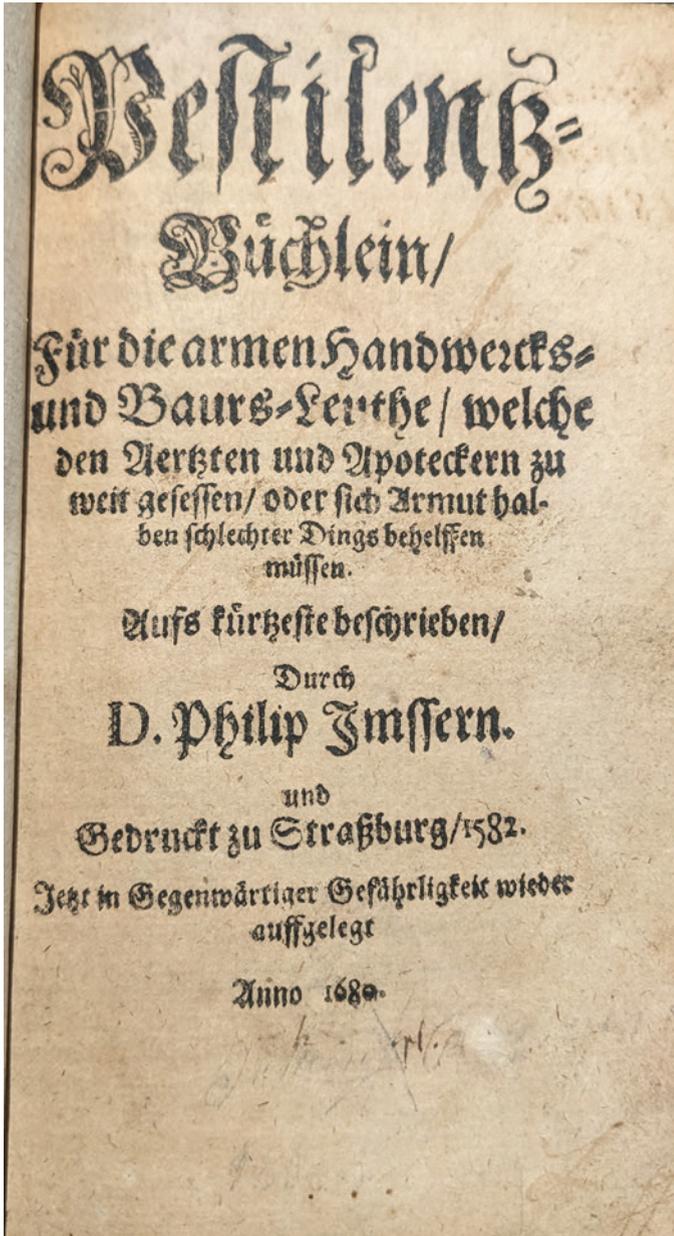


FIGURE 1.5 Philipp Imsser, Pestilenz Büchlein/ Für die armen  
 Handwerks- und Baus Leuthe. [without place] 1680,  
 Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Xb 265  
 FOTO: STEFAN LAUBE

the 75 first editions of the 'Kurtzen Berichte' on plague can vary greatly, ranging from a single sheet to 200 pages.

The plague treatise can be traced back to the 'Plague Consilium' in the fourteenth century, which incorporated the expertise of a second doctor. Almost all European plague literature was influenced by the so-called Plague Consultation, which was prepared by the Medical Faculty of Paris on behalf of Philip VI and completed in October 1348, and which commented on various epidemiological, preventive and therapeutic options for the plague. It consists of two parts. The first part deals with causes and prognoses, whereby the constellation of the planets is seen as the cause and is used for further prognosis. The second part gives therapeutic advice, especially on prophylaxis according to the scheme 'sex res non naturales', and describes surgical therapies.<sup>26</sup> In plague tracts of the printing era their authors presented themselves as experts to a non-specific audience. Plague tracts had an appealing character, they wanted to steer people's behaviour in the right direction. Sometimes the advice is given in rhyming verse so that it can be better remembered.<sup>27</sup> Even in the twenty-first century during the pandemic, there are comparable procedures with pictograms, placards, slogans and also acronyms (like the AHA rules in Germany) related to hygiene measures.<sup>28</sup> Again and again, it is about reminding people simply and quickly of the right behaviour.

Plague tracts: what is it all about?<sup>29</sup> From the last decades of the fifteenth century onwards, these kinds of tracts often replaced medical care, which was increasingly unavailable even in the big cities and was in any case unaffordable.<sup>30</sup> The recurring outbreak of plague and the expected sales

26 With the plague consilium, a new specialist literature developed in Europe in 1348, which is closely related to the plague regimina. Plague regimina are dietary instructions for doctors and lay people. The two forms of literature intermingle; Klaus Bergdolt, *Der schwarze Tod in Europa. Die große Pest und das Ende des Mittelalters* (Munich: Beck, 1994), pp. 27–30; on the typology of these text genres dealing with the plague Eva Martha Eckkammer, *Medizin für den Laien: Vom Pesttraktat zum digitalen Ratgebertext*, (Berlin: Frank&Timme, 2016), pp. 135–150.

27 Rhyming speech is an indicator of the continuing relevance of oral channels of communication, especially in the case of instructions on how to behave during the plague, which were read out in public places, Bernhard Dietrich Haage, 'Handschriftenfunde und Nachträge zum Pestgedicht von Hans Andree', *Sudhoffs Archiv*, 63 (1979), pp. 392–406; Georg Sticker, *Die Pest als Seuche und als Plage*, *Abhandlungen aus der Seuchengeschichte und Seuchenlehre*, vol. 11 (Gießen: Tölpelmann, 1910), pp. 300–310.

28 A = Abstand (distance), H = Hygiene, A = Alltag mit Maske (daily life with mask).

29 Karl Sudhoff, 'Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des 'Schwarzen Todes' 1348', *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 5 (1911); Heft 1 and 2.

30 Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident (XIV<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Une cité assiégée)* (Paris: Fayard, 1978); Peter Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter. Teufels-, Todes- und Gotteserfahrung.*

success encouraged authors, printers and publishers to produce such works already in the age of early book printing, in the age of incunabula. Arnold C. Klebs and Karl Sudhoff showed in the 1920s how strongly plague writings influenced early book printing: they found 25 different plague writings in the 1470s alone, and a rapid increase in the last decades of the sixteenth century, not only in Germany, but also in Italy and France, almost all of them written in the vernacular language.<sup>31</sup> Whenever the plague epidemic overlapped with the technical innovation of printing, it was quite possible that the history of printing began locally with a publication on the proper behaviour in times of plague, as was apparently the case in Ulm.<sup>32</sup> The first printed plague treatise in German Steinhöwel's *Ordnung der Pestilenz* was published in Ulm by the first local book printer Johann Zainer at the beginning of 1473, January 11, on 'Montag nach Einhardi'.<sup>33</sup> To date, no Ulm tract from 1472 has turned up, which does not mean that none existed. The list of incunabula published in Ulm also shows that Steinhöwel's plague tract was apparently indeed the first printed manuscript brought to market.<sup>34</sup>

Such sources represent an attempt to take the terror out of the unpredictable plague by explaining its causes, and to alleviate the feeling of powerlessness in view of such deadly despotism. This includes helpful recommendations to all practising colleagues from men of high authority. These classical tracts followed the same pattern: the account of the causes, course of disease, then of the prevention and remedies. Although the thesis of historians such as Jean Delumeau that attitudes toward fear, pessimism, and apocalyptic doom were

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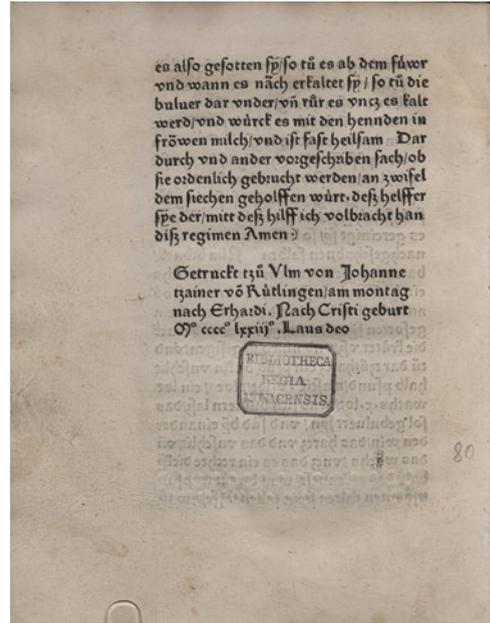
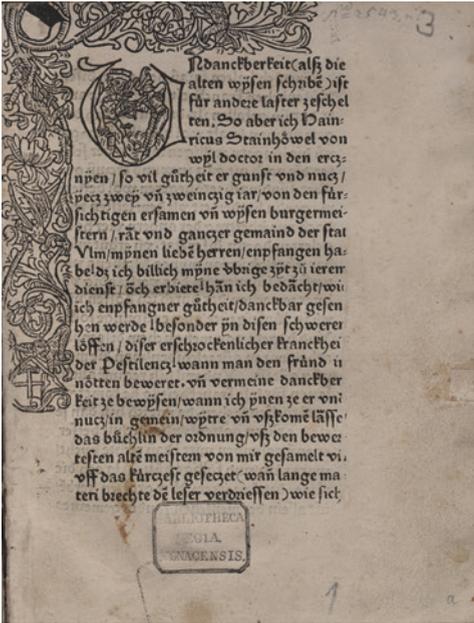
*Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996). According to Cohn the most significant change in the reporting of plague, however, came with the plague of 1575–1578, when the threat of plague triggered an explosion of plague publications in Italy. This plague also created a more significant break in mentality and plague literature than any other later plague, Samuel K. Cohn, *Cultures of Plague. Medical Thinking at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

31 Arnold C. Klebs and Karl Sudhoff, *Die ersten gedruckten Pestschriften* (Munich: Verlag der Münchner Drucke, 1926); see also Joseph P. Byrne, 'Printing', in *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*, ed. by Joseph P. Byrne (Santa Barbara/Denver/Oxford: ABC-Clío, 2012), pp. 293–294.

32 See Karl Sudhoff: 'Der Ulmer Stadarzt und Schriftsteller Heinrich Steinhöwel', in *Die ersten gedruckten Pestschriften*, eds. by Klebs/Sudhoff (Munich: Verlag der Münchner Drucke, 1926), pp. 171–213.

33 See <https://www.ustc.ac.uk/editions/749219> and <https://mrhf.online.uni-marburg.de/21440>.

34 Bernd Breitenbruch, *Die Inkunabeln der Stadtbibliothek Ulm. Besitzgeschichte und Katalog* (Weißenhorn: Konrad, 1987), pp. 335–336. Conveniently, Zainer provided his publications with precise dates, so the first print listed in this catalogue is Steinhöwel's *Deutsche Chronik*, published on February 10, 1473, a month after the latter's *Ordnung der Pestilenz*, which the Ulm library does not have.



FIGURES 1.6 AND 1.7 Heinrich Steinhöwel, *Büchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz*, Ulm: Zainer, 1473. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 307 [https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00031805?page=7, https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00031805?page=86]

largely unchanging in wide circles of society until the Enlightenment has since been put into perspective, with good reasons, it remains striking how little the plague tracts have changed structurally over a long period of time.

Prototype of all plague treatises at least in the German-speaking world is Heinrich Steinhöwel's *Büchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz* [Small book of the order of pestilence]. As can be seen from the colophon, the 40-page manuscript was first printed by Johann Zainer in Ulm in 1473. This is one of the first printed medical texts in the vernacular.<sup>35</sup> This tract has also two parts: in the first part, Steinhöwel informs about the symptoms and causes of the plague, he gives hygienic and dietary instructions as well as recipes for disease prevention. The second part is devoted to the therapy of the disease and is aimed more at a medically trained audience. More or less effective countermeasures such as plasters with tinctures for the ulcers are mentioned, as was the all-purpose

35 See also an early English example: *Here begynneth a litil boke the whiche traytied many gode thinges for the pestilence* (London: Machlinia, 1485), probably mistakenly attributed to Benedikt Canutus [Bengt Knutsson].

weapon 'bloodletting' which proved, as so often, to be blunt. The contents of plague tracts show how 'modern' already the contemporaries of the sixteenth century were set or how 'archaic' we must still act in the twenty-first century, if nature in the anthropocene challenges us. What was already striking with Rülein: it seems like today's anti-COVID appeals when Steinhöwel urges us to avoid large gatherings of people and everything that comes directly from the sick person.

Accordingly, Steinhöwel considers both prevention and care for those who are already ill to be important. He wants his book to be used for both cases. At the same time, he is well aware of the limits of the human healing art of the time, when he notes in the preface that the 'rod of God' is the best medicine, since there is no better remedy than true confession, true repentance and perfect penance. For support, Steinhöwel also recommends invoking Saint Sebastian as an intercessor. Basically, however, this writing is permeated with pragmatism: Steinhöwel repeatedly refers to a way of life that is characterised by moderation. This applies not only to the satisfaction of basic needs such as food or drink; grief and joy in particular also come into focus when he states that fear make a people susceptible to illness: 'In addition, one should distract the sick person as much as possible from thoughts of death and pestilence. And one should always encourage him and keep him in joy with singing, telling stories, playing the lute and everything that brings joy.'<sup>36</sup> Steinhöwel thus, in a quite modern manner, emphasizes the psychological effects of positive thinking.<sup>37</sup>

As already indicated, the four focal points of the present volume of essays can be presented on the basis of plague tracts. Perhaps already the wording of the section headings can serve as some sort of instruction manual for our volume.

#### 4 Books in Use and Their Traces

As the product of a complex crafting process, the handy guidebook is an artifact, or as Ursula Rautenberg has put it 'a hybrid of writing (and other symbolic signs or images), design, and matter' that generates specific information from

36 'Außerdem sollte man den Kranken so weit wie möglich von Gedanken an Tod und Pest ablenken. Und man sollte ihn immer wieder aufmuntern und mit Singen, Erzählen, Lautenspielen und allem, was Freude macht, bei Laune halten.' Heinrich Steinhöwel's *Buchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz* (Ulm: Zainer, 1473), unpag.

37 Gerhard Eis, *Medizinische Fachprosa des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1982), p. 110. Such references to the importance of positive thinking can be found in epidemic literature up to the present day.

given formats.<sup>38</sup> The instruction manual is exposed to an extraordinary extent to physical processes of adaptation and change that express specific user experiences, preferences and interests: subsequent text corrections, erasures or deletions, annotations, glossing, drawings, additions of further procedures: all these changes can be made to the how-to book. These small format, unadorned books were simple in typographical terms. Many contain contemporary handwritten annotations.<sup>39</sup> A telling example is the already mentioned *PestilenzBüchlein/ Für die armen Handwercks- und Baur-Leuthe* that shows inconspicuous but evident markings in the form of a cross where the text says something about prophylaxis for pregnant women. Often you find extensive recipe notes and underlining: the 1482-edition of Steinhöwel's *Pestbüchlein*, located in Wolfenbüttel, contains pages of handwritten recipe notes with a reference to the year 1525, but no mention of names.<sup>40</sup> It is obvious that plague tracts, mostly written in the vernacular for the general public, were eagerly used. Throughout the early modern period, we encounter the problem of a severe shortage of medical care for wide sections of the population in Germany and Europe. The advent of printing offered a fundamentally new possibility for medical assistance: unlike handwritten texts, it was possible to pass on medical knowledge to many people at the same time. Information about individual diseases, knowledge about the production of medicine, and the application of appropriate therapeutic measures could be acquired.

## 5 Change and Combination of Media

Once the recipes are printed in a book, it is possible to compare them, examine them, and see what they have in common. The idea of 'standard practices', as opposed to those taught by a particular master, emerged.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the numerous annotations in recipe books indicate that the elementary

38 Ursula Rautenberg, 'Das Buch als Artefakt und kommunikatives Angebot. Die Exemplar-geschichte des 'Herbarius latinus' (Mainz: Peter Schöffer, 1484) aus der Bibliothek des Christoph Jacou Trew' in Ulrike Gleixner, Constanze Baum, Jörn Münkner and Hole Rößler (eds.), *Biographien des Buches* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017), pp. 39–88, here p. 47.

39 I can rely here on the research results that Petra Feuerstein-Herz brought to light for a Wolfenbüttel exhibition *Gotts verhengnis und seine straffe* [God's Fate and Punishment] on early-modern epidemics. *Gotts verhengnis und seine straffe – Zur Geschichte der Seuchen in der Frühen Neuzeit*.

40 Heinrich Steinhöwel: *Ordnung der Pestilenz* ([Nürnberg]: [Drucker der Rochuslegende] [ca. 1482–84]), [28] BI.; 4°. [HAB 27.1 Astron. (6)].

41 Michael Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), pp. 505–560.

medium of the recipe is the notebook.<sup>42</sup> There is certainly no printed recipe that was not previously exchanged orally and then written down. Steinhöwel's Plague tract, written as early as 1446, when Steinhöwel was a physician in Weil am Rhein and witnessed the outbreak of the plague there, circulated for decades as a manuscript, even beyond 1473, when it was to be printed for the first time.

To this must always be added the oral buzz that the treatise triggered. It was only through printing and reproduction that even the short treatise on the plague was to receive an exactly designed reading surface as well as a degree of uniformity in structure and substance that is not evident in manuscripts.<sup>43</sup> Although the first printed works are very similar on a formal level to the manuscripts of the period, one only has to look at the first page of Steinhöwel's book, which does without a conventional title page, a refinement of the presentation is emerging in the tailwind of technological-typographical development, which is primarily aimed at saving costs for the producer as well as time for the recipient to absorb the information. Reader-friendly elements are used early on, such as indexes, title keywords in the margin, visual paragraph marks, pagination by Arabic numerals, red markings still inserted by hand, sometimes footnotes, diagrams. The tendency towards stringent ordering schemes, already evident in medieval manuscripts,<sup>44</sup> is significantly expanded and strengthened by printing.

42 Elizabeth M. Merrill, 'Pocket-Size Architectural Notebooks and the Codification of Practical Knowledge', in Matteo Valleriani (ed.), *The Structures of Practical Knowledge*, (Berlin, Springer: 2017), pp. 21–54; Jan-Dirk Müller, 'Der Körper des Buches. Zum Medienwechsel zwischen Handschrift und Buch', in Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer (eds.), *Materialität der Kommunikation*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 203–217; Norman F. Blake, 'From Manuscript to Print', in Jeremy Griffith and Derek Pearsall (eds.), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 403–432.

43 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 126.

44 See the classic study for the structuring of the book page in the Middle Ages Ivan Illich, *Im Weinberg des Textes. Als das Schriftbild der Moderne entstand* (Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand, 1991).

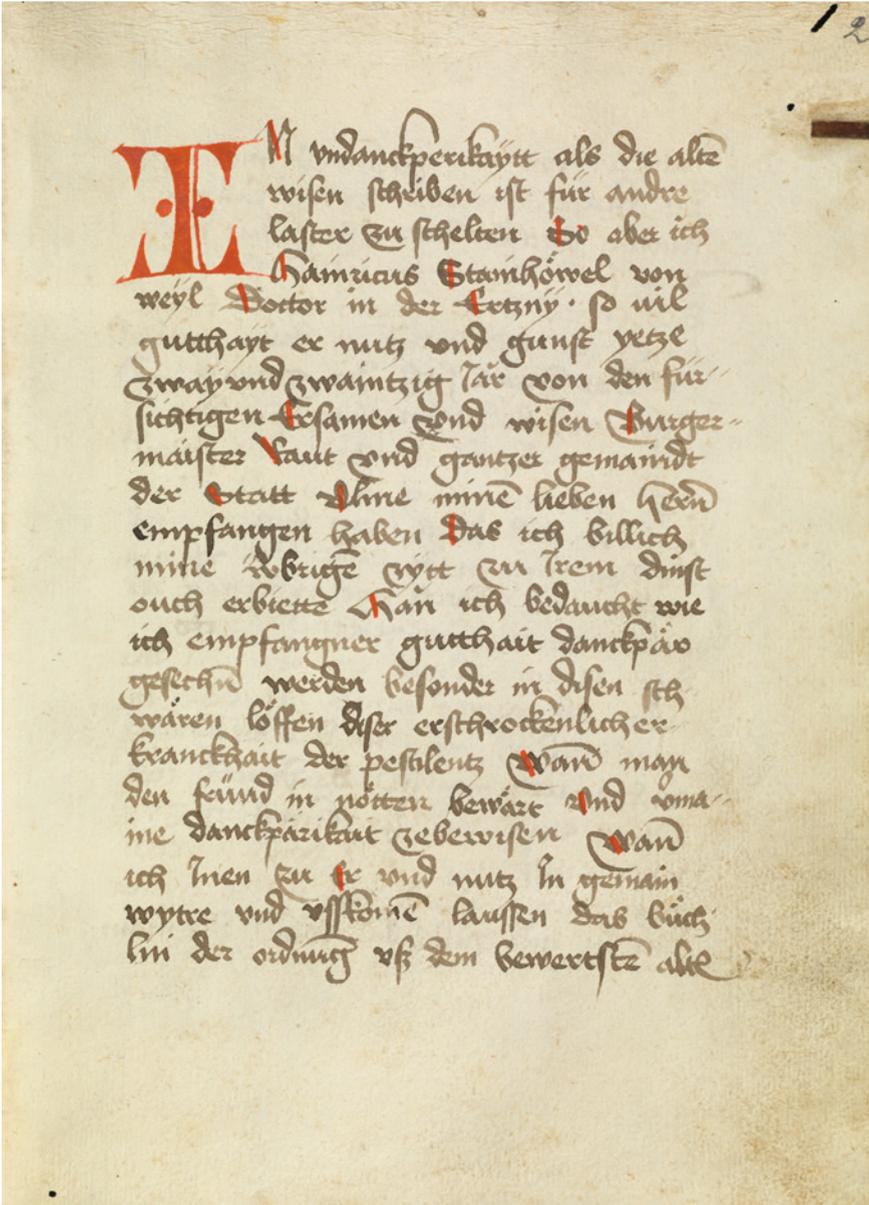


FIGURE 1.8 Heinrich Steinhöwel, Büchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz, um 1470, Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, Gen.26, fol. 2r, fol. 4v. [https://www.e-codices.ch/en/sbs/gen0026/2r/0/]

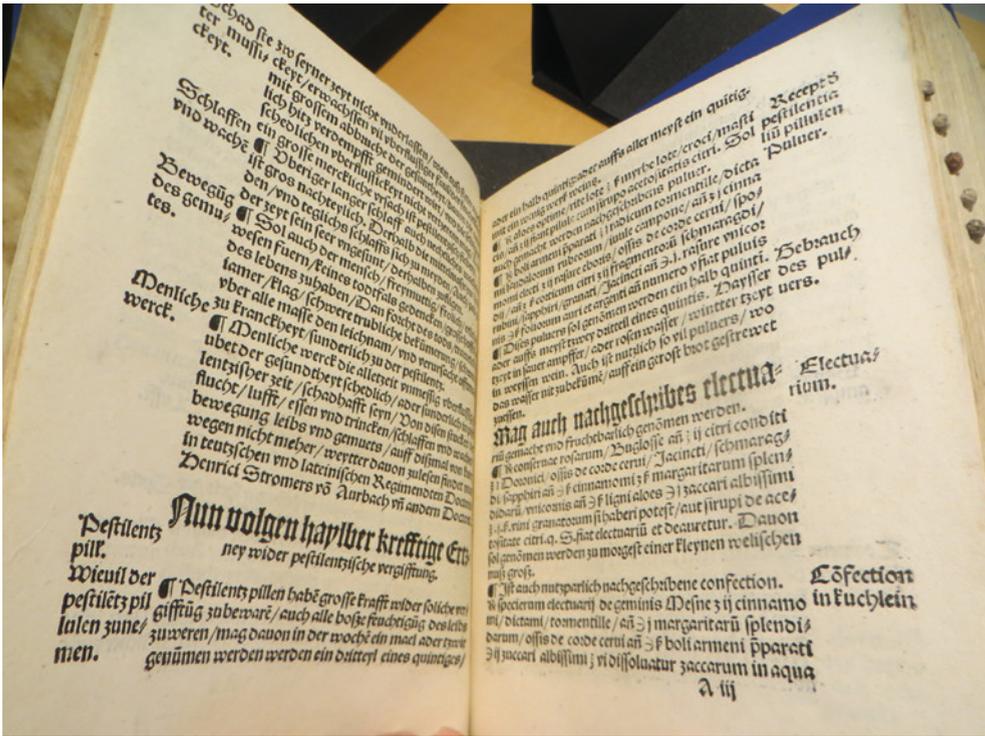


FIGURE 1.9 Ein kurtze Unterrichtung heilbarer krefftiger ertzney, mit welchem sich der Mensch wider die pestilencz bewaren, Leipzig: Lotther, 1515. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, 76.2. Quodlibetica

FOTO: STEFAN LAUBE

## 6 Visual Translation and Intermediality

An early picture on the plague. In Hans Folz' *Ein fast köstlicher spruch von der pestilencz* (Nürnberg 1482) a surgeon cuts open a plague wound. The draftsman must have been there.

What role do images and graphic figures play in these treatises? They often belong to the genre of 'technical drawing' and 'diagram'.<sup>45</sup> An advice treatise rarely consists of text or images alone. Picture titles, captions, tables or speech bubbles as well as pictograms, diagrams or arrows give reason to assume that description and picture are only the conceptual poles of a spectrum in which numerous mixed ratios of verbal and iconic expressions are scaled. Despite

<sup>45</sup> See to the types of images Eckkrammer, *Medizin für den Laien*, pp. 1074–1080.



FIGURE 1.10 Hans Folz, Ein fast köstlicher spruch von der pestilencz, Nürnberg 1482. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 185 [<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00027051?page=6>]



FIGURE 1.11 Heinrich Steinhöwel, *Büchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz*, Ulm: Zainer 1473, Bl. 3, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Rar. 307 [<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb00031805?page=7> (detail)]

significant exceptions, as seen here, plague advice tracts are sparsely illustrated. It is not so easy to put a contagious disease, like the plague, into the picture.<sup>46</sup> It is striking that technical-referential pictorial elements, which often appear in surgical writings, are mostly absent in the plague tracts. How should one visually represent explanatory models of the plague, such as the miasma theory, that is, the idea that toxic vapor or mist filled with particles of decomposed matter caused the diseases and which was very widespread at the time?

Steinhöwel's *Büchlein der Ordnung der Pestilenz* contains a speaking initial as the only illustration. In the inner space of the letter 'U' we see two people: a warrior armed with a crossbow and a barely clothed young man tormented

46 Robert Herrlinger, *Geschichte der medizinischen Abbildung. Von der Antike bis um 1600* (Munich: Moos, 1967), pp. 57–62.

by arrows. The latter is not recognizable by medical signs of illness, such as the characteristic plague bumps; rather, arrows that have struck him and are still being fired at him represent his martyrdom as St. Sebastian.<sup>47</sup> Arrows mirror the fateful visitation of a deadly plague that has taken the form of disease projectiles that can strike everyone.<sup>48</sup> According to the scheme 'similia similibus', the depiction Sebastian refers to the religious subject matter of divine projectiles of disease, in which spears and arrows always dominate.<sup>49</sup> Although the roots of the cult of St. Sebastian were ancient, the depiction of this Saint became popular only in the fifteenth century. Since his martyrdom is reminiscent of that of the individuals affected by the plague, he has been considered the most important plague saint since the late Middle Ages.

Obviously, the most consistent metaphor for pestilence has been the arrow.<sup>50</sup> The disease itself can 'attack', 'invade', 'defeat' or 'retreat'. It is a kind of enemy waging war against our health and even our lives.<sup>51</sup> In battle, arrows fell from the sky, the supposed source of the plague, and struck victims indiscriminately. Skilled archers could hit targets at long distances with great accuracy, silently and without warning. Just as arrow wounds were not always fatal, neither was plague. Whether God's plague struck indiscriminately or specifically picked someone out, the arrow metaphor worked brilliantly. Crossed arrows also appeared as talismans to ward off the plague and were painted on houses in Luxembourg until the beginning of the twentieth century.

47 Often the 'black death' was depicted as a skeleton sitting on a galloping horse throwing arrows. On the multifaceted nature of the arrow as a pictorial symbol in old and new media Angelika Storrer and Eva Lia Wyss, 'Pfeilzeichen: Formen und Funktion in alten und neuen Medien' in Ulrich Schmitz and Horst Wenzel (eds.), *Wissen und neue Medien. Bilder und Zeichen von 800 bis 2000* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2003), pp. 159–195.

48 What the arrows represented then, nowadays in COVID times the spiky viral bullet staged by the media seems to embody as an omnipresent symbol of aversion. Only the good sting of the injection syringe with the vaccine seems to neutralise the spikes, which are actually elastic feelers.

49 Dinzelsbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter*, p. 211.

50 Joseph P. Byrne, 'Arrows', in *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*, ed. by Joseph P. Byrne (Santa Barbara/Denver/Oxford: ABC-Clio, 2012), pp. 22–23. Paracelsus said that the plague strikes man like a whip. Many Christians considered it a whip, a tool of divine punishment. The metaphor of plague arrows developed even before the Black Death. Famously, Homer Achilles unleashes an epidemic in the form of a barrage of arrows on the Greek camp outside Troy. The angry Yahweh declares in Deuteronomy (32:23–4), 'I will shoot all my arrows against them: consuming hunger and wasting fever and bitter pestilence', which makes those who oppose him smile.

51 Recently Emmanuel Macron, French president, has argued the same way in the face of the COVID challenge in March 2020.

In the interaction of text and image, one must always ask whether there is a more or less equal relationship between image and text, how much the conveyance of information can be replaced by the other without loss, i.e. the text information is replicated, reinforced, one can also say illustrated by the image. But it can also be that between in the relation of image and text the image factor is the dominant one, that is the image transports content that goes beyond the text. The image is more on the defensive when it works as ornamental addition. How problematic these distinctions ultimately are, however, is shown by Steinhöwel's initial, which clearly goes beyond pure decoration.

## 7 Practical Implementation

How-to books differ from other treatises because they address the reader directly. Verbalized explanations in an advice book have the function of prompting action. Their reading is performatively oriented. It can detach from the source, creating a space for improvisation that needs to be explored. It was not until the microscopic discoveries of Robert Koch and Louis Pasteur that a fundamental advance in knowledge was achieved. Prior to that, faith in God, humoral-pathological or dietary medicines and behavioral recommendations, magical practices and escape had long been the means of choice, all of which oscillate between prescription and improvisation always carrying a praxeological component.

The variety of medicines used was large, numerous medicinal plants were found among them, which were assigned to certain recipes, which can hardly be reconstructed. There were probably no two people in the healing business who made the miracle remedy theriac in one and the same way.<sup>52</sup> As a rule, 60 herbs or herbal ingredients, including opium, were mixed with three separately produced remedies. Theriac was considered particularly effective and valuable if it bore the 'Venice' brand as sign of origin. Not only there, but also in cities like Nuremberg or Strasbourg, the production of theriac resembled a public ceremony. It would, of course, be an interesting question to what extent the pharmacists and physicians operating in marketplaces made use of the abundant advice literature. In the search for a panacea, alchemical methods were also used, precious stones were placed over the heart of the plague sufferer or

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<sup>52</sup> Theriac as mother of all drugs, Cohn, *Cultures of Plague*, pp. 160–163.

ground into powder to sprinkle over food.<sup>53</sup> Ben Jonson's popular comedy *The Alchemist* (1610) is set in plague-ridden London.<sup>54</sup>

And last but not least, the great controversy of flight, which only works if it is implemented. Escape was considered the recipe for success par excellence: Steinhöwel says about this: 'Flee quickly, flee far, return late, for truly, these are three more useful herbs than a whole apothecary.'<sup>55</sup> This was a simple way out, immortalized in literature by Giovanni Boccaccio from the point of view of the well-heeled, and expressly ruled out by Martin Luther in 1527 at least for priests and other people in positions of responsibility.<sup>56</sup> What is to be made of this from a practitioner's point of view? On the endpage of a handsome volume with a compilation of papal indulgences for the Jubilee Year, published in 1502 by the humanist Nikolaus Marschalk in Erfurt, who was known for his first printed Greek textbooks, are pasted passages cut from a Low German version (Magdeburg: Brandis) of Steinhöwel's Plague Book. Was there an apotropaic

53 Chiara Crisciani, Michela Pereira, 'Black Death and Golden Remedies. Some Remarks on Alchemy and the Plague' in Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, Francesco Santi (eds.), *The Regulation of Evil. Social and Cultural Attitudes to Epidemics in the Late Middle Ages* (Firenze: Sismel, 1998), pp. 7–39; Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, 'Der Stein der Weisen und die Pest. Heil und Heilung im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit', in Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, *Das Okkulte. Eine Erfolgsgeschichte im Schatten der Aufklärung. Von Gutenberg bis zum World Wide Web* (Munich: Siedler, 2008), pp. 35–70.

54 The owner of a house has fled to escape the plague, leaving his house in the hands of servants. These lend it to a pair of rogues who 'concoct' the alchemical philosopher's stone, the panacea that promises untold wealth; Mathew Martin, 'Play and Plague in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*', *English Studies in Canada* 26 (2000), pp. 393–408; Cheryl L. Ross, 'The Plague of the Alchemist', *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988), pp. 439–458.

55 'Fliecht schnell, fliecht weit, kehrt spät zurück, denn wahrlich, diese drei Kräuter sind nützlicher als eine ganze Apotheke.' Heinrich Steinhöwel: *Büchlein der Ordnung Der Pestilenz* (Ulm: Zainer, 1473), unpag; see also Heinz-Peter Schmiedebach and Mariacarla Gadebusch Bondio, 'Fleuch pald, fleuch ferr, kum wider spat ...' Entfremdung, Flucht und Aggression im Angesicht der Pestilenz (1347–1350), in Irene Erven and Karl-Heinz Spieß (eds.), *Fremdheit und Reisen im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997), pp. 217–234.

56 Martin Luther, *Ob man vor dem Sterbn fliegen muge* (Wittenberg: Lufft, 1527) UTC 679040. Speaking of Luther: The forbidden 'fuga corporalis' is contrasted with a commanded, even necessary 'fuga spiritualis', through which one escapes the power of the devil and finds refuge in God, who has the necessary antidotes ready. Those affected should make use of the available bodily medicines, take measures to restore hygiene, and not expose themselves unnecessarily to the danger of infection that plague sufferers pose: "Take to you what can help you, smoke house yard and alleys, avoid also person" [nym zu dir was dich helfen kan, reuchere haus, hoff und gassen, meyde auch person ...] WA 23, 365, 24–25, see Johann Anselm Steiger, *Medizinische Theologie. Christus Medicus und Theologia Medicinalis bei Martin Luther und im Luthertum der Barockzeit* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005), p. 11–12.



FIGURE 1.12 [Peraudi]: Resoluciones Certorum Dubiorum, Erfurt: Marschalk, 1502, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, 448.1 Theol  
 FOTO: STEFAN LAUBE

motivation behind this practice? Was it to protect oneself from the plague? We do not know.<sup>57</sup>

8 Books Are not Contagious – Books Are Contagious

Advice books in plague times were bestsellers, especially in the early phase of printing but also in the decades that followed. Due to the numerous epidemics,

57 The plague tracts and the plague blessings are two sides of the same coin: Annica Schumann, 'Chronik, Pestgrigimen und Pestsegen. Schriftliche Zeugnisse der Auseinandersetzung mit der Pest', *Pest! Eine Spurensuche*, ed. by LWL-Museum für Archäologie, Westfälisches Landesmuseum Herne, Stefan Leenen, Alexander Berner, Sandra Maus, Doreen Molders (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2019), pp. 190–197; see also Michael Schilling, 'Pest und Flugblatt', in *Gotts verhengnis und seine straffe – Zur Geschichte der Seuchen in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Petra Feuerstein-Herz, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005), pp. 93–99.

a climate of permanent fear prevailed, that cried out for advice in order to be processed in a halfway constructive manner. Such tracts followed the same pattern: causes, course of disease, prevention and remedies. Why such writings were written for lay persons in the first place is interpreted in different ways. Some argue that in plague times, the number of published plague tracts and books for lay people is evidence of the ethical responsibility of physicians.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, others see this phenomenon of the proliferation of plague texts with a prophylactic character as a sign of the impotence of the medical profession.<sup>59</sup>

The modern era in Europe did not begin with the Reformation, but with the plague (Egon Friedell).<sup>60</sup> Since the Middle Ages, Europe has regularly experienced epidemics, from plague to cholera. The associated economic crises accelerated innovations such as the canalization and supply of drinking water and in the fifteenth century printing.<sup>61</sup> In the longer term, the late medieval world did begin to dissolve; massive population losses led to the abandonment of poor and unprofitable farmland, so that entire villages were abandoned and swathes of land became desolate. In the cities, on the other hand, wages rose, as did the general standard of living. At the same time, higher labor costs encouraged technical innovations such as printing to mechanise cost-intensive manual labour. The plague and epidemic pamphlets had a noticeable influence on the book trade. The printing press, together with the abundant provision of paper as a carrier of information, which began as early as the fourteenth century subsequently allowed a more accurate, faster and cheaper reproduction of texts and books and thus a penetration of written form into social domains that had previously been reserved for orality.<sup>62</sup>

Books are not contagious: one was far less likely to contract the plague from a printed document than from a consultation with a doctor, who could hardly avoid plague sufferers. The spread of paper on which information could be stored, first by handwriting, then in the second half of the fifteenth century

58 Darrel W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society, and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

59 Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

60 The *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit* (1927–1931) is the main work of the Austrian writer Egon Friedell. At the beginning of great turning points in time there is always a great trauma. The boundary between the Middle Ages and modern times is marked by the Black Death, which destroys the unified world view of the Middle Ages and dissolves old certainties. For Friedell, the cultural triumph of the early Renaissance was also a consequence of the Black Death.

61 Jörg Vögele, 'Cholera, Pest und Innovation', *Die Volkswirtschaft* 6/2020, pp. 22–25.

62 Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit*; Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change. Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, Selling and Reading, 1450–1550* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1974).

increasingly by printing, guaranteed distance between people. It was no longer absolutely necessary to enter into an oral exchange with the specialist. The avoidance of the loss of human life as well as the collective fears surrounding epidemics virtually forced the emergence of text genres that opened up a preventive-therapeutic intermediate level and spoke the language of the layman. If one is not protected from the disease by the outside, by the medical profession, the medicalized society, the state, then one must protect oneself individually, with the help of a printed medium.

Books are contagious! Only with the printing press can content go viral, when hundreds, even thousands of copies from the same treatise can have their effect in different places. Perception could be readjusted. The users of printed advice literature in particular were faced with entirely new possibilities where they could adjust their behavior, try out new practices. It was only because the multiplication of literature through the printing press reached completely new dimensions that a storehouse of knowledge was created that could always be drawn upon should the need arise.

Whatever the motives of the authors, the impact of the texts must be evaluated positively; and this not only because they sometimes give sensible instructions for the avoidance of infection. Above all, the psycho-hygienic reassurance provided by the advised measures, which are always presented as tried and tested and coming from the greatest authorities, must be put on the scale. The instructions open the possibility of active intervention and thus preventive and therapeutic alternatives to the individual who is anxiously facing the epidemic. Medicines are recommended, as well as behaviours and attitudes that can be implemented without the presence or consultation of a physician.

So, can there be any clueless advice books at all? Hardly. Certainly, there can be guide books that spread nonsense, that make claims that go astray.<sup>63</sup> But even then, one has to deal with a setting that rather inspires confidence than causes disorientation. As wrong as the miasma theory is from today's perspective, it nevertheless represented a plausible explanation in the wake of which reasonable measures, such as avoiding crowds and improving the air, were implemented.

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63 See a thought-provoking example from today: Rundall Munroe, *how-to. Absurd scientific advice for common real-world problems* (London: Murray, 2019).