



## Our Daily Dread

*"The Kiss of Death", unknown artist, Barcelona, 1930*

*Churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches like goods in a ship's hold, and covered with a little earth.*

Giovanni Boccaccio, on the Black Death

† THE ROMANS EXPRESSED SO MUCH displeasure at the criminality of the papacy that it was eventually evicted from the city. Four years after his election as pope in 1305, Clement V took up residence in Avignon, France, thereby initiating the seven-decade long 'Babylonian Captivity.'

Clement V is chiefly remembered today for his persecution of the Knights Templar under the prodding of King Phillip IV of France, who was deeply indebted to the order. On Friday, October 13, 1307, the leading Knights Templar were arrested and burnt at the stake as heretics. (The event is often mistakenly cited as the origin of our popular superstition about Friday the 13th.)

When Clement V died in 1314, Europe was in the grip of a severe famine. Hopelessly divided in choosing a successor and forced by King Philip V to endure a forty-day fast, the cardinals finally anointed one of their number to determine who was the worthiest among them to be pope. The chosen cardinal promptly put the papal tiara on his own head and proclaimed himself Pope John XXII.

While Europe starved, John amassed so much wealth through taxes and the sale of church offices that he was reportedly the richest man in the world at his death in 1342.

Declaring "My predecessors did not know how to be popes," the fourth Avignon pope, Clement VI, built the finest palace in the world at Avignon, which he largely handed over to the Inquisition. Clement could often be found cavorting with prostitutes in the palace's tower, unperturbed by the screams of victims being tortured below.

The scholar Petrarch colorfully described the papal court at Avignon as “*boiling, seething, obscene ... a fountain of dolour where Jesus Christ is mocked and money is adored.*” Apparently finding the luxurious palace insufficient for his needs, Clement purchased the entire town of Avignon from Queen Johanna I—in return granting her clemency for the murder of her husband.

But Clement’s reckless spending quickly depleted the Church treasury. Unable to wait for a new century to begin, he proclaimed 1350 as a jubilee year, opening the door to the sale of indulgences. (The financial innovation proved so lucrative that it soon became standard practice within the Church, further corrupting the papacy and helping spark the Reformation two centuries later.)

The Black Death swept through Europe during Clement’s reign, killing between 30 and 60 percent of its population. Not one to miss a financial opportunity, the pope granted remission of sins to plague victims—provided, of course, they bequeathed their wealth to the Church.

Many Christians blamed Jews for the plague, unleashing yet another wave of antisemitic bloodshed, with hundreds of Jewish communities ruthlessly exterminated. On St. Valentine’s Day in 1349, 2000 Jews in Strasbourg were burnt alive before the plague had even reached the city.

Jews were blamed in part because they were less susceptible to the disease—but ironically, that was due to their isolation in ghettos and Jewish laws promoting cleanliness and proper burial of the dead.

To his credit, Clement attempted to intervene, issuing two little-headed bulls condemning the violence. But while papal astronomers blamed the plague on a rare planetary conjunction, many blamed the pope himself, believing Clement’s multitude of sins had brought divine retribution.

On his deathbed in 1352, Clement commissioned statues of no less than forty-four of his relatives to surround his ornate, marble sarcophagus, a testament in stone to his unbridled vanity and nepotism.

The sixth Avignon pope, Urban V, attempted to return the papacy to Rome, but finding the plague-ravaged city in ruins and the Lateran Palace infested with bats, he departed after only three years.

A certain cardinal prophesied that Urban would soon die if a pope were to again abandon Rome—and, sure enough, Urban obliged shortly after his departure. As Pope Gregory XI, that same cardinal himself briefly restored the papacy to Rome in 1377, but when his ambassador to Cesena, Roberto Visconti, massacred half that town’s population of 10,000, the resulting riots forced him to also flee the city.

When Gregory died, a Roman mob broke into the conclave demanding an Italian pope, and Urban VI was hastily elected. But the cardinals soon had a change of heart, returning to Avignon, electing another Frenchman, and thereby initiating the four-decade long ‘Western Schism.’

Pope Clement VII—none other than Roberto Visconti, the ‘Butcher of Cesena’—continued in his usual manner, ordering five cardinals accused of plotting against him tortured, stuffed into sacks, and hurled into the sea. Meanwhile, back in Rome, Urban VI discovered a similar plot to remove *him*, and had six of *his* cardinals hurled into the dungeons and tortured. (Urban’s secretary recounted how the pope would read his breviary in a loud voice to muffle the screams of the conspirators, while his bastard son stood alongside them jeering.)

Not surprisingly, when Urban VI died in 1389—reportedly from injuries sustained while falling off his mule—its was widely rumored that he had in fact been poisoned.