

Andreas Ryff on the Plague (second half of the 16th century)

Abstract

Andreas Ryff (1550-1603) was a Basel businessman and political figure who wrote of his experiences with the Basel outbreak of the plague in 1563-4. Many of his siblings became ill from the plague and four of his brothers perished from the illness within seventeen days. While his account of the plague is important in its own right, his autobiography also provides an important example of early modern *Selbstzeugnisse*, or “self witness” documents that demonstrate the increasing rise of the “individual” in early modern Europe.

Source

[...]

The plague began during the Martini fair [November] in the year 1563 and did not abate during the winter. [...] In July and August 1564 it increased so dramatically that it appeared to be the worst onslaught [*sterbent*] in a 100 years. [...] However, in September 1564 nobody had yet contracted it at my father's house, but shortly thereafter my sister Salome got sick, and had to lie down for 3 or 4 days, but recovered and regained her health. On September 17th “*anno 64*” my youngest brother Diebolt got ill and died on September 20th; on September 24th Hans Jacob, my stepbrother on my father's side [of the family], contracted it and died on the 28th; on September 26th his brother Wolfgang, the almoner, also my stepbrother, got ill and died on the 29th; Jacob and Wolfgang were laid to rest in a common grave. On October 1st in 1564 my middle brother got sick and died on the 3rd; hence the plague took away four of my brothers within 17 days. God, please be graceful so that we will meet in eternity, where there will be more joy than in this troublesome world.

[...]

During the autumn fair we traded cloth at the House *Zur Mücke* [close to the cathedral square] [...]. There, on St. Martin's Day in 1564 [...] I turned sick, I felt freezing cold, went home and sat down behind the stove. Shortly thereafter my father appeared together with a surgeon who applied some bloodletting to my right arm. They put me on a bed with my clothes on, where I fell asleep. I don't remember anything about the four weeks that followed, even though heat and headaches attacked me, I was not entirely conscious but babbled strongly and was very unrestful. The only thing I remember is the great pain I suffered when the surgeon dressed my wounds [...]. I had a boil under my left arm, which was opened with pincers a few days after I had been put to bed. I certainly felt this and woke up because of it. The wound secreted so much blood and puss that everybody was astonished. The flow continued for three weeks, so that two halves of bed sheets were pushed under my arm twice a day, which turned completely humid.

[...]

At Christmas time, when my health was improving, I began to walk around the room. On New Year's Day 1565, I longed for some new food and asked my father to take me along with him to guildhall *Zum Schlüssel*. There I had lunch. However, because I still had open wounds and had been weak and ill, I slowly went home to use the bathroom where I fell asleep on the toilet. From there I was taken back to

bed, without waking up, and stayed there for another 8 days.

[...]

Source of original German text: „Selbstbiographie des Andreas Ryff (bis 1574),“ ed. Andreas Heusler, in *Basler Beiträge zur vaterländischen Geschichte*, Vol. 9 (1870). Available online at: <https://www.e-periodica.ch/digbib/view?pid=bg-001%3A1870%3A9#68>

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