CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GUNNAR KARLSSON’S ALTERNATIVE THEORY: THAT HISTORICAL PLAGUE WAS PURE EPIDEMICS OF PRIMARY PNEUMONIC PLAGUE

Introduction

G. Karlsson presented his alternative theory to the international community of scholars in a paper published in *Journal of Medieval History* in 1996 where he argues that two late medieval epidemics in Iceland and more generally that plague in medieval Europe were pure epidemics of primary pneumonic plague.¹ For his epidemiological interpretation, Karlsson bases his alternative theory directly on Morris’s assertion of the occurrence of pure epidemics of primary pneumonic plague, a modality of plague disease spread by interhuman cross-infection by droplets. The concept of a pure epidemic of primary pneumonic plague implies that the origin of the epidemic is not a case of bubonic plague which develops secondary pneumonia but a case in which the first victim contracted pneumonic plague directly by inhalation of infected droplets into the lungs.

Karlsson’s paper follows quite closely and draws heavily on a paper he published together with S. Kjartansson in an Icelandic journal in 1994 on two supposed plague epidemics in Iceland in 1402–4 and 1494–5 respectively.² He is clear about its objective: “The present article [as the first in Icelandic] can be seen as a defence of the late Jón Steffensen against Benedictow’s critique of his conclusions,” namely, that these epidemics, and also the Black Death of 1348–9 in Norway were primary pneumonic plague.³ Thus, the central feature of Karlsson’s (and Karlsson’s and Kjartansson’s) paper on the two supposed plague epidemics in fifteenth-century Iceland is a comprehensive and sharp criticism of my doctoral thesis (1993, repr. 1996). The apparent objective was to clear the way for his own theory that the epidemics were

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pure epidemics of primary pneumonic plague: the epithet “pure” determines that they were without any basis or origin in flea-borne plague from rats (or other rodents) or cases of human bubonic plague. Thus he thinks that the contagion was the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, as in the case of bubonic plague, but the process of dissemination was interhuman cross-infection by droplets and not transmission by rat fleas at any stage of the epidemic process. This immediately presents the insurmountable problem of how primary pneumonic plague could arise in the complete absence of bubonic plague and in the complete absence of rats, a problem he surprisingly does not identify or try to explain (and the editors and consultants of the *Journal of Medieval History* did not find significant). Alternatively, he might have launched a theory of importation, which he conspicuously fails to do and, as we shall see, for the very good reason that this would disclose another insurmountable problem, which is that there is no place abroad whence plague in any form could have been imported into Iceland in these years (another problem which the editors and consultants of the *Journal of Medieval History* did not find significant).

The Icelandic epidemics exhibit such peculiar features that Karlsson, as the first of the advocates of alternative theories, has to invent some suitable mutations in order to defend his theory. He does not consider that his assertion as to the occurrence of these mutations can move from the status as arbitrary or speculative to the status as tenable (at any level of validity) only by meeting some elementary methodological requirements, namely to explain to the scholarly community:

1. why and how and by which process of evolutionary selection this mutant strain or biovar came into being;
2. when and where, in Iceland or abroad, this mutant strain of primary pneumonic plague originated and developed;
3. whether this mutated variant miraculously came into being twice; and
4. where on earth (literally) it had been in the meantime (another problem which the editors and consultants of the *Journal of Medieval History* did not find significant).

Undaunted by these formidable problems, Karlsson expands the perspective of his theory from its tiny and isolated Icelandic territorial base in the middle of the North Atlantic to argue that historical

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