

A Life in the Black Death:  
The Inventory of Alayseta Paula  
(Marseille, 1348)

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Hi everyone, my name is Dan Smail. I am a professor of medieval history at Harvard University. I work primarily on the social and legal history of later medieval Mediterranean Europe. I am currently at work on the life history of a Berber slave in medieval Marseille and am also leading a project on medieval material culture.

**Title Slide** The story that I want to tell you today, which is a story about the experiences of a young woman in the Black Death of 1348, has a prologue, because nothing about the story makes any sense unless you know why, and how, it is possible for us to know it. **Tabula Rogeriana** So let me first tell you about the paper revolution.

**Zoom in to China** Paper is a technology that was invented in China nearly 2,000 years ago. **Islamic Lands** By the tenth or eleventh centuries, the technology had made its way westward, and was in widespread use in the Islamic world as a writing support.

**Western Mediterranean** Around the year 1100, paper began to trickle into use in Western Latin Christendom. Two centuries later, it was everywhere. Great drifts of it have survived to this day in European archives. The arrival of paper in southern Europe allowed for a great expansion in the range of legal and administrative documents everywhere, starting first in the Mediterranean and gradually spreading north. With these sources, it becomes possible to enter into the lives of ordinary people.

The person I want to tell you about today, Alayseta Paula, lived in the city of Marseille in what is now southern France. **Zoom in.** Since the map we've been looking at was Islamic in origin, I'll have to **turn it** upside down... In this **map** of Marseille from 1575, Alayseta's house would have been located in one of the suburbs just outside the walls of the city, **more or less** where the arrow is pointing. Her family belonged to the urban peasantry, that is to say, workers and farmers who lived in the city but owned and worked the land and vineyards in the surrounding countryside.

**Image of document** I first encountered Alayseta some years ago while reading an estate inventory that she put together in August of 1349. **Zoom in to her name...** Before the onset of industrial production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, household things were often incredibly valuable. For most people, even relatively well-to-do people, the value of the things they owned, such as clothing, linens, and dress accessories, often outstripped the combined value of all their landed property. **Zoom back** So when someone died, it made sense to compile an inventory of the estate. That way, you could make sure that the heirs would get everything owed to them. Occasionally, those inventories have survived, and they are an incredible source for people like me who love to walk into late medieval households and poke around to see what people had.

Alayseta inherited a lot of stuff from her father, Bertran Paul. If you want, you can poke around for yourself in the inventory she made. But that's not primarily what I want to tell you about. In August of 1349, Alayseta had a legal problem. Her father had

died the previous year, a victim of the plague. As his heir, she should have filed an estate inventory with the appropriate officials within a month of his death. And here she was, more than a year late. So what did she do?

**GATE** On that day, she would have left her house, entered the city through the gate you can see here, and made her way along the streets to the city's courts of law, **Image of Accoules** which met out of doors in the plaza before the church of Accoules. **Church** The spire survived destruction by the Nazis in 1943 so you can still visit the place today. **Zoom.** She gave her name to a sergeant of the court and was ushered before the judge, a man named Guilhem de Montoliu, a member of one of Marseille's most distinguished families. Put yourself in her shoes. Was she nervous? Maybe. But not because she was a woman. The majority of those who compiled inventories were widows representing the interests of their children, so women were totally used to appearing before judges.

**Document** If she was nervous, it was because her request was long overdue. For that reason, she felt it important to explain to the judge what had gone wrong. This is more or less what she said (and what I'll do here is zoom into the **actual passage**)

My lord, my name is Alayseta Paula. I am the daughter of the late Bertran Paul, and I live in the suburb of Syon. I am here before you because during that terrible year of plague just past, my father, in the sickness from which he then died, drew up his last will and testament. In it, he named my mother, Alazays, as his heir. In case she were to die, he then named me and my sister Johanna, as next in line. The notary Jacme Aycart drew up the act on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March in 1348. And then, during that time of plague, my mother and my sister Johanna both died. And my husband died. And there I was, all alone in the world, deprived of all my kin, pregnant and weak, and continually filled with sorrows and afflictions. Because of my enfeebled state and my anguish, I did not request permission earlier to compile an inventory of the goods and the inheritance of my father. Here now, humbly and tearfully, for the love of God and for pity's sake, I beg you to grant me permission to compile the inventory.

In case there's any suspense, let me say right now that there wasn't any chance that the judge was going to deny her request. In response, he said: "Hardly anyone during that punishing time could take care of his own or indeed anyone's business, so just swear on your oath that you are not seeking to defraud anyone, and let's get on with it." By the way, something interesting happened around the word for "plague"... **Image...** you might just be able to make out the letters of the Latin word "mortalitatis." But you can see from the fragments of some letter shapes that the notary had scratched out a previous word and written over it. There are even faint traces of red sealing wax on the paper.

The event she described, often known as the Black Death, was the second plague pandemic, the first being the Justinianic plague of late antiquity. The pathogen responsible for the plague, *Yersinia pestis*, probably emerged from the Tibetan plateau in the middle of the thirteenth century. It has been with us ever since then, with major

outbreaks from time to time, the most recent of which took place in the nineteenth century. **Image** If you're not careful, you can still catch it in the Western U.S. **Zoom in** The plague reached Byzantium, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe around the year 1346, and over the next seven years killed between 40 and 60 percent of the population of those lands. Recent advances in genetics have given us amazing new insights into the cause of the second plague pandemic and also the chronology and geography of its spread.

What was it like to live through a pandemic? **Image** There are almost no contemporary images of the Black Death, this being one of the rare exceptions. **Zoom** But we do have a number of verbal descriptions in chronicles and texts from the age. All concur with Alayseta's description of the horror, and it would be easy to imagine that society as a whole simply collapsed from the shock. To think like a historian, however, it is important to learn to read between the lines, and to consider what the document *isn't* trying to tell you.

The plague struck Alayseta's city in January of 1348 and lasted for about six months. Her father, Bertran, died at the height of the outbreak, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March. In light of this chronology, some of you may have already noted an interesting feature of Alayseta's story. As her father lay dying in bed, a notary named Jacme Aycart came to record Bertran's last will and testament. The notary was accompanied by seven witnesses, and no doubt Bertran's wife and family were present as well.

The historian Guy Geltner has recently argued that the practice of social distancing was pioneered in medieval Italian cities and towns in response to disease and plague. The word "quarantine" itself is a medieval Italian word for the 40-day waiting period that was enforced to prevent the spread of the disease. In 1348, clearly, the message hadn't yet reached the folks in Marseille. For me, however, the scene provides a different lesson. What it tells us is that family, friends, and neighbors never stopped helping one another even in the midst of a pandemic. Even the city's legal institutions carried on, as notaries conducted business as usual.

By a remarkable coincidence, we actually have the register of acts that the notary Jacme Aycart made in 1348. Preserved in it are a number of other acts involving Bertran Paul and/or members of his family, including Bertran's last will and testament, the one referred to by Alayseta, as well as the testaments of Alayseta's mother and husband. Barely a week before Bertran's death, he agreed to serve as the guardian for the six-year-old daughter of a friend who had just died. The next day, he agreed to serve as the executor for the estate of another dying friend or neighbor. When he drew up his testament, he made special provisions for his daughter, Johanna. Why? Because Johanna was physically or mentally disabled, and Bertran wanted to ensure that his wife and daughter Alayseta would always take care of her.

What can we take from this short history of the Paul family? One of them is to wish that all of you have friends and neighbors as good as Bertran Paul. Beyond that, the story tells us something about the experience of plague. Yes, the second plague pandemic was terrible. But people survived, and went on with their lives. Even more, we learn that human society is tremendously resilient. It is kept together by the bonds of charity and duty, and can triumph even in the worst of times.

**Slide** Thank you for listening, and please write to me if you have any questions.