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Death on the Lake: A 1338-9 Outbreak of Human Mortality in the Issyk-Kul Region - the Earliest Documented Episode of the Black Death?

The geographic origins and paths of dissemination of *Yersinia pestis*, responsible for the second human pandemic, known as the 'Black Death', have long been debated by scholars. In 2013, a palaeo-genetic study has reconstructed the phylogenetic tree of *Yersinia pestis* and on the basis of the geographic distribution of these lineages, it concluded that *Yersinia pestis* must have evolved somewhere in China at some point in the late thirteenth century. It is not until 1346, however, that we hear about an outbreak of plague in humans (in the course of the siege of Caffa, during the Genoese-Mongol conflict in Crimea).

This chronological and geographic gap between the initial polytomic 'big bang' in late thirteenth century China and the first documented outbreak in Crimea has been puzzling the historians of the plague for some time now. The present paper offers a modest contribution to the topic, by considering important, but relatively under-appreciated (and often dismissed) epigraphic evidence on mass human mortality deriving from tombstone inscriptions from two Nestorian cemeteries in the Issyk-Kul region (North Kyrgyzstan) in 1338-9, namely some seven years before the 1346 outbreak in Crimea. The paper subjugates the epigraphic evidence to both linguistic and statistical analysis, in order to establish various aspects of mortality patterns of the 1338-9 outbreak, in relation to 'normal' year burials in Issyk-Kul and to Black Death mortality in several European localities (principally London, Dubrovnik, Barcelona, Givry and Lübeck). A comparison of the Issyk-Kul mortality levels and patterns with those in Europe reveals a striking degree of similarity. The impression that the 1338-9 outbreak may, in fact, have been the earliest documented instance of second pandemic outbreak is strengthened further by the analysis of the climatic, eco-biological and socio-economic context of the Issyk-Kul region in the 1330s, based on both recent palaeo-climatalogical studies and (the few available) primary sources, written in Syriac, Arabic and Persian.