

Dance 'til You Drop

The Dancing Plague of 1518



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Introduction

In the summer of 1518, Strasbourg had a problem — and it wasn't the usual medieval fare of plague or famine. Instead, dozens (and perhaps hundreds) of townsfolk suddenly took to the streets and started... dancing. And they didn't stop. For weeks. Historians have since scratched their heads, blaming everything from bread mould to collective madness — but whatever the cause, it remains one of history's strangest raves.

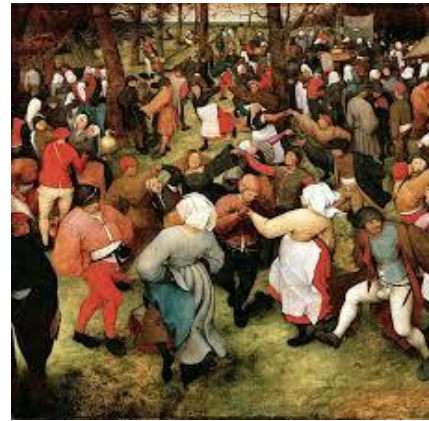


How Did it Start?

The unusual outbreak kicked off on 14 July 1518, when a woman called Frau Troffea inexplicably began dancing... and didn't stop. She was outside her house on the narrow, cobbled streets of Strasbourg, Germany, with no music, no invitation, and apparently no sense of personal boundaries. She just started bopping away – and didn't stop. Days passed yet Frau Troffea twirled on relentlessly. Within a week, dozens of others had joined the impromptu street rave, including her own daughter, Frauline Emma Götz. Clearly, rhythm runs in the family.

As weeks went by, the dancing fever spread like wildfire. By August, the so-called “Dancing Plague” had allegedly ensnared around 400 victims. But this wasn't the tango. Witnesses described the movements as spasmodic convulsions: arms flailing, eyes vacant, bodies drenched in sweat, and feet so swollen that blood pooled into their shoes.

While some danced and cried for help simultaneously, others collapsed from sheer exhaustion, hunger, or thirst. Rumours suggest a few may have perished from heart attacks or strokes – but whether anyone truly danced themselves to death is still hotly debated. Some sources whisper that the plague claimed as many as 15 lives per day at its peak, though contemporary Strasbourg records curiously omit any mention of fatalities. Either way, it was less “flash mob” and more “nightmare cardio class from hell.”



What Did the Authorities Do?

Local leaders were completely baffled by the outbreak and decided it must be some sort of “illness.” Naturally, they handed the problem over to the city’s physicians, who – after careful medical deliberation – prescribed the most logical cure imaginable: “Just dance it out.” To make sure patients complied, guild halls were refurbished to accommodate the growing dance floors, musicians were hired to keep the beat going, and “strong people” were enlisted to hold up the exhausted dancers when their bodies gave out.



Predictably, this plan backfired spectacularly. Residents, convinced they were being punished by Saint Vitus himself, decided the best way to absolve themselves of sin was to join the chaotic conga line. Eventually, the council had no choice but to ban dancing outright – they even banned music, lest the epidemic be tempted to rebound.

For the most stubborn dancers, things got a bit more... ceremonial. They were ordered to march to the shrine of Saint Vitus wearing red shoes sprinkled with holy water, decorated with painted crosses on top and bottom, holding small crosses in their hands, chanting Latin incantations, and waving incense around like there was no tomorrow.

Miraculously – or perhaps thankfully – once word spread that Saint Vitus had granted forgiveness, the dancing epidemic began to fizzle out. By September, the last few dedicated dancers were escorted to a mountaintop to pray for absolution, and the streets of Strasbourg finally got some much-needed rest from all that uncontrolled twirling.

What do they think caused it?

There are a few modern theories as to what might have caused this bizarre outbreak:

Food Poisoning: Some researchers suggest that the dancing could have been triggered by food poisoning from a toxic, psychoactive chemical produced by **ergot fungi**, which commonly grow on grains like rye – the staple for bread at the time.

The main psychoactive compound, **ergotamine**, is structurally related to **lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD-25)**, the substance from which LSD was originally synthesised. This same fungus has even been linked to other historical anomalies, including the **Salem witch trials**.

However, this theory has its limits. It doesn't explain how people could dance for days without collapsing, nor why so many individuals would respond to the psychotropic chemicals in exactly the same way. It also fails to account for why almost every recorded outbreak occurred along the **Rhine and Moselle rivers**? Different climates, different crops – yet the plague seemed to have a very particular taste in geography.

Stress-Induced Mass Hysteria: Another explanation is that the dancing plague was a case of **psychogenic movement disorder** triggered by **mass hysteria** (or mass psychogenic illness), where large groups of people suddenly exhibit the same strange behaviour.

Considering the extreme stress of the period – starvation, disease, and deeply held superstitions – it's not that hard to imagine the people needing a really, really unusual way to cope. In fact, historians have recorded seven other dancing plagues in the same area during the medieval era, proving that when it came to spontaneous choreography, Strasbourg and its neighbours had quite a history.

Notable Dancing Plague Outbreaks

1. 1237 – Erfurt, Germany

A group of children began dancing uncontrollably and continued for miles, eventually reaching Arnstadt.

2. 1278 – Aachen, Germany

Around 200 people danced on a bridge over the River Meuse, causing it to collapse. Many were later treated in a chapel dedicated to Saint Vitus.

3. 1373-1374 – Multiple Locations

A significant outbreak began in Aachen and spread to cities including Cologne, Metz, Strasbourg, Utrecht, and Tongeren.

4. 1418 – Strasbourg, France

A group of people danced for days, reportedly due to exhaustion and possibly fasting.

5. 1428 – Schaffhausen and Zürich, Switzerland

In Schaffhausen a monk danced to death; in Zürich, a group of women experienced similar symptoms.

6. 1536 – Basel, Switzerland

A group of children were reported to have danced uncontrollably.

7. 1551 – Anhalt, Germany

A solitary individual experienced a dancing episode.

These outbreaks highlight the recurring nature of dancing mania in the region, often linked to periods of social stress and hardship.



Conclusion

The Dancing Plague of 1518 remains one of history's strangest medical mysteries. Whether it was caused by contaminated bread, collective hysteria, or

The Dancing Plague was the inspiration behind the song "Choreomania" by Florence and the Machine. It was the third track on the album *Dance Fever*, which took its title from the song.

something else entirely, the event offers a fascinating glimpse into the lives and stresses of people living in late medieval Europe. For a few harrowing weeks, the streets of Strasbourg were filled not with the sounds of markets and daily life, but with frantic, sweat-soaked dancing – a spectacle which must have been terrifying and absurd, in equal parts.

Though the outbreak eventually ended, it left a lasting mark on history, inspiring generations of scholars, physicians, and curious storytellers to puzzle over the mystery. It also reminds us, in a strangely cheerful way, that human behaviour can sometimes defy all expectations – and that even in the most difficult times, people might just start dancing... whether they want to or not.



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