The Plague Years

http://mentalfloss.com/article/49217/anatomy-14th-century-bubonic-plague-hazmat-suits

Doctor Sigurd Asbjorn

My name is Doctor Sigurd Asbjorn. I live in Bergen, Norway. I am a widower with the death of my 5 children still in my mind and heart.

My friends are dead or stay in their homes afraid. The markets are shut and food for the townspeople is in short supply. Most have relatives on outlying farms that give them food which they barter. A lot of farmers shoo townspeople away for fear of the disease.

There are no travellers and there is little life, we do not hear the music of our travelling musicians – our Minnesingers.

I have a few patients left who will leave their homes to visit me. Most of our monks have died, and our monasteries have been abandoned, so the dead receive no prayers or rites. We have lost our scholars, our art and our music.

I am now poor and have little food left in my isolated home. My servants are dead or have left when the plague came to my home. I cannot understand why I survived. No one believes medicine or indeed prayer can cure them.

I too feel hopeless. My treatments did not save almost half of the population of my town. God has forsaken us.

This is my chronicle of my life before this great pestilence came in 1349 and my memories of the first year afterwards.
**We start during happy times.**

My home is Bjorgvin or as you would call it Bergen, a city of 5,000 people with a beautiful sheltered Harbour. We called it “the city between the seven mountains”. We were an important trade centre and central harbour for western Norway. We supplied all the catholic countries of Europe with dried cod and relied upon imports of grain, wool and spices.

This was a prosperous town with wealthy merchants who I charged a great deal for my cures. I too was wealthy and happy. The Hanseatic League has a settlement in the town, some would say ghetto. They are Germans who trade all over Europe.

![Image of Bergen](http://arkivverket.no/manedens/apr2004/arbeidet.html)

**On being a doctor**

I received my license as a doctor after studying 3 years of philosophy, astrology, and 4 years of medical study at Catholic Universities in Paris and Bologna. I follow as all doctors do the teachings of the great physician and scholar Galen.

I used herbs, especially the very expensive Theriac, a herbal jam to treat all illnesses. I used astrology, and blood-letting to restore the balances of the soul which cause illnesses.

I believed that the body and soul were linked directly. The soul had 3 parts: the rational soul in the brain, the spiritual soul in the heart, and the appetitive soul in the liver.

I believed illness was a punishment from god so I prayed and attended St Mary’s Church (seen below), built in. 1180. I made sure to pay my tithes of 10% of my
earning like everyone else to the church.

I attended the sick in their homes and at the once very elaborate Munkeliv Benedictine Abbey. I was once supported by the church and respected by my family, friends and servants.

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mary's_Church,_Bergen#/media/File:Maria.bg_-_2.jpg

**The pestilence arrives**

I had heard reports of this terrible pestilence across Europe but believed we would be safe as we were not connected by land and the winds blew away from mainland Europe.

It was September 1349, reports came of a ship in the harbour full of dead people. I inspected the dead who had terrible signs of pestilence.

We burnt the ship and thought we were safe.

Within days people from all areas of the city rich merchants, monks and the poor developed fevers. I took careful records of my almost all died. We could not predict who would survive. The poor could not afford a doctor but I helped as best I could.

I recorded the following signs of this pestilence.

- Day 1-2: Fever, headache, and fatigue, followed by severe muscle pain and delirium.
- Day 3: Swelling of the lymph glands in the neck, armpits, and groin. Bleeding under the skin comes next, causing purplish blotches. Dark-ringed red spots on the skin from infection called bulboe turn black, producing putrid-
smelling pus.

- Day 4-6: Their symptoms worsened. Skin blackens and blood leaks from all body parts
- Day 7: Death.

**My daily life**

Church bells rang and people flocked to monasteries to offer payers, buy religious talismans and repent. This did not save them. Children died – how could they have sinned to deserve such a death? My belief in religion started to disappear.

Many believed it was god’s anger so bands of Flagellants wandered the city whipping themselves begging for god’s mercy. Many looked for scapegoats including Jews who were murdered.

No ships came and we ran out of food so people stay in doors and protected their food from robbers.

I use all my medical knowledge. I use herbs, lanced their black boils and try to balance their soul through blood letting, leeches and diets.

I do not know what is causing this disease but realise it must be contagious.

My clothing must have protected me. My clothing is made of leather and wax to also ward off the disease. My red eyepiece wards off the evil spirits, and my stick means I do not have to touch these people. My bird like mask is full of vinegar and sweet smelling oils to cover the smell of rotting bodies found across the city. We have no one to bury these poor souls. The people dig plague pits to bury the dead.

https://www.pinterest.com/pin/515873332286683822/
The future

This pestilence is now 1 year on and life is how I have described.

I do not know what the future will hold. I do know we are all equal in this time as wealth and education does not protect you. Many of us who survive feel guilty and for some they feel invincible and live life as if death could come tomorrow- which it could. As I doctor I believe we will learn from this disease and our theories of medicine will change.

Our children are greatly affected as this nursery rhythm explains which you may know. All of our songs and art are macabre.

Ring a-round the rosy
Pocket full of posies
Ashes, ashes!
We all fall down!

Meaning:

Ring around the rosy: rosary beads or the red faces because of fever
Pocket full of posies: flowers and sweet oils used to stop the odour of rotting bodies
Ashes, ashes: the church burned the dead when there were too many bodies
We all fall down: dead.

http://cokomoto.com/ring/ring-around-the-rosy-meaning-behind-the-nursery-rhyme-.html