

**Zeitschrift:** gta papers  
**Herausgeber:** gta Verlag  
**Band:** 5 (2021)

**Artikel:** The London Wall and the Great Plague of 1665  
**Autor:** Astengo, Gregorio  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-976199>

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# The London Wall and the Great Plague of 1665

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1 Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London: E. Nutt, 1722), 19.

2 Paul Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 187.

3 Gary W. Shannon and Robert G. Cromley, "The Great Plague of London, 1665," *Urban Geography* 1, no. 3 (1980), 254–70; Slack, *Impact of Plague*; Justin Champion, *London's Dreaded Visitation: The Social Geography of the Great Plague 1665* (London: Historical Geography Research Group, 1995); Edward Copeland, "Defoe and the London Wall: Mapped Perspectives," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 4 (July 1998), 407–28.

*"The Face of London was now indeed strangely alter'd, I mean the whole Mass of Buildings, City, Liberties, Suburbs, Westminster, Southwark and altogether; for as to the particular Part called the City, or within the Walls, that was not yet much infected."* <sup>1</sup>

During a period of about ten months over the summer of 1665, almost 20 percent of the population of London died from an epidemic of bubonic plague. Known as the Great Plague, this was the last of a long series of outbreaks—occurring in England previously in 1603, 1625, and 1636—which killed about one fifth of London's overall population as part of the centuries-long "second plague pandemic." <sup>2</sup> Among other major epidemics, the Great Plague of London stands out not only for its high body count and the rate at which it killed victims but also for the vast documentation produced at the time. This includes burial counts, especially the weekly "Bills of Mortality" (the weekly reports collected by parish officials and built up to create burial chronicles for all London parishes) as well as personal accounts and narratives, like those of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Pepys, which provide insights into the epidemiology and cultural dimension of the plague. In fact, the vast scholarship on the Great Plague has systematically focused on these sources to produce comprehensive spatial patterns of the plague upon the social geography of London. <sup>3</sup>


In line with existing studies on the urban dimension of the plague, this paper investigates the role of an overlooked yet fundamental element of the city, the London Wall. Since the Middle Ages, the ancient Roman fortification surrounding the central portion of London changed from a military installation into an important piece of administrative infrastructure, separating the wealthier 30 percent of the population living inside its perimeter from the rest of metropolitan London. During the summer of 1665, the Wall turned into an active participant in the movement, management, and cultural conception of the pandemic. It not only drove the spread of the plague but, more importantly, offered to the authorities a system to control the displacement of civilians, at the same time producing the powerful image of a barrier against the "invading" disease. In establishing the Wall as a physical presence, containment system, and cultural imaginary, I argue that the nature of the London Wall as a mechanism for social segregation already existed "within" the Roman structure and was reactivated during the months of the plague. Thanks to its accepted institutional dimension within the political geography of London, the Wall temporarily reacquired previously latent characteristics,



directing the plague, generating policy, and filtering perceptions of the disease.  fig.1

## London and Its Wall

As in many urban settlements with a fortified past, since its Roman inception in the first century CE, London had always been surrounded by a defensive wall. While the presence of a wall may not be particularly noteworthy, the London Wall had, since the Norman Conquest in the eleventh century, come to shape the political geography of the city along two autonomous and interdependent centers of governance. The Royal Government held general power over metropolitan London and its region, with headquarters located in the palace of Whitehall in Westminster along the River Thames to the southeast. Meanwhile, the central area of London was governed by a distinguished local authority known as the Corporation. The Corporation held jurisdiction over an area encompassing the central and more ancient portion of the city, the so-called Square Mile. It appointed its own mayor, police force, and guilds, and held substantial independence from the Crown. This area was often simply known as “the City,” distinguishing it from the rest of London, whose political territory continued in all directions into the countryside. <sup>4</sup>

The jurisdiction of the City was made up of 113 parishes, of which ninety-seven constituted its primary political body. <sup>5</sup> These ninety-seven parishes were physically separated from the sixteen outer “liberties” and from the rest of London by the imposing presence of the Roman Wall, a brick-and-stone defensive fortification surrounding the City towards the west, north, and east. Originally erected around the third century to defend the Roman settlement of Londinium, the Wall was a substantial feat of engineering and one of the largest Roman fortifications in the British Isles. Despite being abandoned after the fall of the Empire, it was subsequently renovated during the Middle Ages. As a result, in the seventeenth century the Wall remained a continuous and imposing presence in London: up to nine meters tall, it ran for more than three kilometers around three sides of the City. <sup>6</sup> Its oldest portions, up to two meters thick, were made of ragstone mixed with mortar, upon which newer segments of brickwork were added, often with battlements on top.  fig.2

Despite its impressive appearance, since the Late Middle Ages the Wall had retained no military function, progressively turning into an organic component of the urban fabric. <sup>7</sup> Since the early sixteenth century, dozens of houses, churches, shops, and scrapyards encroached along both sides of the Roman structure, and London continued for miles beyond it. Its seven primary

<sup>4</sup> Steen E. Rasmussen, *London: The Unique City* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 33–36.

<sup>5</sup> The jurisdictional division of early modern London was subject to some debate. For the purpose of this essay, the system adopted is the one proposed by Vanessa Harding, “The Population of London, 1550–1700: A Review of the Published Evidence,” *London Journal* 15, no. 2 (1990), 111–28, here 111–14.

<sup>6</sup> Walter G. Bell, F. Cottrill, and Charles Spon, *London Wall through Eighteen Centuries: A History of the Ancient Town Wall of the City of London* (London: Simpkin Marshall, 1937); Brian Hobley, “The Archaeology of London Wall,” *London Journal* 7, no. 1 (1981), 3–14.

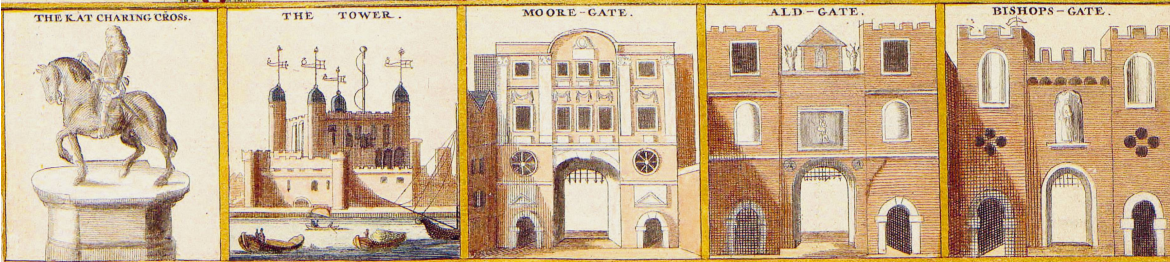
<sup>7</sup> Even during the English Civil War, just some twenty years earlier, it was decided to defend the perimeter of London by erecting a new system of lines of communication, an eighteen-kilometer-long rampart encompassing both the city and its suburbs. Hobley, “Archaeology,” 13; Simon Marsh, “The Construction and Arming of London’s Defences 1642–1645,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 91, no. 368 (Winter 2013), 275–98.



**fig.1** Wenceslaus Hollar, map of London from the *Atlas Van der Hagen*, late seventeenth century  
Source: Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Netherlands









8 From east to west, they are: Ludgate, Newgate, Aldersgate, Cripplegate, Moorgate, Bishopsgate, and Aldgate. Thomas De Laune, *Angliæ Metropolis: Or, the Present State of London* (London: George Larkin, 1690), 11.

fig. 2 Remaining portion of the eastern end of the London Wall in Tower Hill  
Source: Brian Hobley, "The Archaeology of London Wall," *London Journal* 7, no. 1 (1981), 3–14, here 12

9 Ian Doolittle, "The Great Refusal: Why Does the City of London Corporation Only Govern the Square Mile?" in "A Review of Metropolitan Society Past and Present," special issue, *London Journal* 39, no. 1 (2014), 21–36, here 24–25.

gates had been progressively enlarged to make way for increasing traffic. 8 In addition, over the centuries, the Wall had also been pierced with smaller additional openings known as posterns, becoming increasingly more permeable.

At the same time, the Wall still acted as a partition, and its presence was a determining factor of urban life. For example, its gates guided the development of the major thoroughfares departing from London, such as Aldersgate Street to the north and Whitechapel Street to the east. More importantly, the Wall identified the ninety-seven parishes inside from the rest of London and established the main territory of the City's governance. With the so-called "Great Refusal," a political move dating back to the 1630s and further confirmed in the 1660s, the Corporation had officially withdrawn the suburban land beyond the Wall from its primary authority. 9 This division, generally distinguished as "within" and "without" or "infra" and "extra," was in turn reflected in the name of its parishes, such as St. Giles-without-Cripplegate or St. Audoen-within-Newgate.



As a result, the London Wall operated both as an immaterial urban presence and a substantial piece of political infrastructure. Rather than a tectonic object with any sort of military or even archaeological interest, the Wall existed essentially as a foundational threshold between two layers of London, a condition visible primarily through the simplified, diagrammatic language of maps. In his survey of 1642, graphic artist Wenceslaus Hollar exemplified the nature of the Wall by representing the territory of the City as a dense and coherent entity existing autonomously from the rest of London. fig. 3 Absent from the engraving, the presence of the Wall is established by the shape and limits of the area, becoming an invisible yet powerfully present demarcation between a sort of citadel and its outer territory. Hollar's bird's-eye view turned a political boundary into a geographical threshold, transforming the City itself into an island, almost metonymic for England's own geography. The Wall negotiated with its presence the system of London's jurisdiction and at the same time limited and contained



any sort of territorial expansion, petrifying the image of an immobile, stable City.<sup>10</sup> It is exactly this role, at once invisible and fully present, that determined the social, political, and urban roles of the Wall during the months of the plague.

<sup>10</sup> Rasmussen, *London*, 33.

## Pestering Places

With its infrastructural presence, the London Wall both separated and bound two distinct and highly uneven portions of London. Alongside a significant territorial disproportion (the extent of the parishes “without” was about three times that of those “within”), the demographic balance between the London “within” and “without” was also highly uneven. Vanessa Harding has estimated that around 1664, between 88,000 and 100,000 people lived in the ninety-seven parishes inside the Wall, against 172,000 to 200,000 living in the sixteen parishes outside, and even more in the suburban territories beyond.<sup>11</sup> As in other notable cases like Florence or Madrid, this demographic imbalance, in which the presence of the Wall was a determining factor, also carried important socioeconomic consequences. It has been estimated that around the mid-seventeenth century between 25 and 50 percent

<sup>11</sup> Harding, “Population of London,” 123. Suburban London was itself also highly uneven, with western portions, especially long the Thames and towards Westminster, significantly wealthier than in the east. See for example Michael Power, “The East and West in Early-Modern London”, in *Wealth and Power in Tudor England. Essays Presented to S. T. Bindoff*, ed. Eric William Ives, Robert Jean Knecht, and J. J. Scarisbrick (Bristol: The Athlone Press, 1978), 167–185.

**fig. 3** Wenceslaus Hollar, survey of the City of London, 1642  
Source: University of Toronto



<sup>12</sup> This is according to the “hearth tax,” a system of contributions introduced by Charles II and based on the number of fireplaces per household. Cf. Vanessa Harding, “Housing and Health in Early Modern London,” in Virginia Berridge and Martin Gorsky, eds., *Environment, Health and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 23–44, here 32; M. J. Power, “The Social Topography of Restoration London,” in A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay, eds., *London 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (London: Longman, 1986), 208; Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 159.

of households along and outside the Wall were poor, against less than 2 percent inside, an economic divide which had been growing dramatically since the previous century.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of the Wall then also carried important effects for the social economies of London. Indeed, at the time of the plague, London beyond the Wall was experiencing an unprecedented building boom, driven by immigration and commerce.

13 William C. Baer, "The Institution of Residential Investment in Seventeenth-Century London," *Business History Review* 76, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), 515–51, here 516.

14 John Evelyn, *Fumifugium* (London: W. Godbid, 1661), 24.

Over the course of a century, more than fifty-five thousand new houses were built in the suburbs, especially towards Westminster, and the population more than tripled.<sup>13</sup> Inside the Wall, this growth was mirrored by a vast densification of the existing built environment, the only possible development of the City's limited urban form, immobilized as it was by the presence of the barrier. This was a notable "annoyance and nuisance" and a cause for concern. John Evelyn's pamphlet *Fumifugium* (1661), devoted to "dissipating" the "epidemicall" miasmas of London's pollution, proposed to move all coal factories towards the periphery and to establish a green belt of trees, orchards, and aromatic shrubs in the "low-grounds circumjacent to the City."<sup>14</sup>

Evelyn was perpetuating a paradigm of social and economic layering which, as was the case in many early modern walled metropolises, occupied much of the public perception of London. Also known as "pestered places," the parishes and suburbs beyond the Wall were almost universally associated with dirt, danger, and disease. Epidemics were called "the poores plagues," insisting on an epidemiological distinction between the two social faces of London. In the public eye, the Wall was not only a political entity but a demographic and sanitary one, establishing an immovable border between two distinct urban realms. Unsurprisingly, then, when the Great Plague hit London, the social paradigms of confinement already suggested by the Wall's presence were cemented and heightened.

### Moving the Plague

It was in St. Giles-in-the-Fields, one of the largest and most populated parishes of suburban London, almost two kilometers west of the Wall, that the Great Plague was said to have originated, sometime in the early months of 1665. The bubonic plague is a highly contagious disease with a quick and equally high mortality rate. Its agent, *Yersinia pestis*, is a bacterium which primarily infects small animals and is transmitted to humans through infected fleas.<sup>15</sup> However, human blood rarely contains enough bacilli for a flea to catch and carry the infection. That is to say, the bubonic plague rarely follows a human-flea-human sequence. Instead, the disease is generally carried around by animals and spread via fleabites. People normally act as secondary carriers, transporting fleas on their clothes.

In the case of London, the primary carrier of the bubonic plague was its vast population of black rats. The rat population of seventeenth-century London, a growing capital of commerce and trade, proliferated around granaries, docks, slaughterhouses, factories, landfills, and overcrowded and decaying households,

15 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 27



all consistently found in the vast and fast-growing suburban parishes of outer London.

During the month of May 1665, the presence of the plague became substantial and started moving across London through the slow but extensive, and mostly unnoticeable, movement of black rats. The primary public records available to trace the movement of the disease are the “Bills of Mortality”. Despite certainly offering an incomplete picture, the “Bills of Mortality” still constitute an important yardstick to investigate the spatial patterns and intensity of the disease, especially in relation to the social and urban geography of London.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the very structure of the Bills followed the infrastructural layering already established by the London Wall. Burial counts were strictly divided between the ninety-seven parishes “within the wall,” the sixteen “without the wall,” and the rest of London and Westminster, reflecting both the jurisdictional and civic distinction imposed by the Roman barrier.

According to the Bills, from late May onwards the epidemic quickly moved across London, reaching the southern side of the Thames by mid-June. Mortality grew throughout the summer, peaking in September with more than three thousand deaths in a fortnight across five outer parishes. Inside the Wall, the situation was considerably different. Here, plague-related deaths were not reported until the beginning of June, nearly two months after the disease had gained significant momentum. According to H. F., the protagonist of Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, “we perceiv’d the Infection kept chiefly in the out-Parishes, which being very populous, and fuller also of Poor, the Distemper found more to prey upon than in the City.” By mid-July, Defoe remarked, “the City, that is to say within the Walls, was indifferent healthy still.”<sup>17</sup> When the plague peaked in early September, deaths inside the Wall remained five times lower than outside, and when the pandemic finally subsided, parishes “within” were the first ones free of deaths.<sup>18</sup> By the end of the epidemic, during the final months of 1665, reported plague deaths reached eighty thousand.<sup>19</sup> Of these, nearly 90 percent were registered outside the London Wall.<sup>20</sup>

As this data suggests, the densely populated City “within” the Wall suffered significantly less than the rest of London.<sup>21</sup> Alongside obvious social and demographic factors — wealthier and healthier parishes ran a lower risk of rat-carried contagions — the significant physical presence of the Wall played an active part in directing the propagation of the plague.<sup>22</sup> The epidemic circled around the Wall and moved across the river before entering its perimeter. The Roman barrier thus turned into

<sup>16</sup> Shannon and Cromley, “Great Plague,” 257.

<sup>17</sup> Defoe, *Journal*, 17. With his *Journal*, Defoe was probably compiling something of a “manual,” in the form of a narrative, to inform the public about the effects of the plague. Defoe was writing in response to the Great Plague of Marseille, which had been killing hundreds of thousands since 1720 and which at the time threatened to move towards England. Curiously, to contain the spread of the disease, the French authorities erected the so-called *mur de la peste*: a two-meter-high, seventy-centimeter-thick, and twenty-seven-kilometer-long drystone wall stretching across the countryside of Provence to protect the region from Marseille. The *mur*, however, did little to contain the disease. See Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 230.

<sup>18</sup> Shannon and Cromley, “Great Plague,” 263–266.

<sup>19</sup> This number is likely to have been under-reported, and deaths have been estimated as reaching one hundred thousand. See Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 151.

<sup>20</sup> Shannon and Cromley, “Great Plague,” 258.

<sup>21</sup> This can still be held true, even though many reported deaths probably occurred inside the Wall, and the bodies were subsequently moved outside for burial and recording.

<sup>22</sup> Shannon and Cromley, “Great Plague,” 268.

23 Defoe, *Journal*, 45.

a true line of defense, making the once-metaphoric image of the City as an "island" into a tangible geographical property. As Defoe put it, "the City was preserv'd more healthy in Proportion, than any other Places all the Time of the Infection."<sup>23</sup> As shown hereinafter, this territorial distinction was only in part determined by the inert presence of the Wall. Instead, the detachment of the City was primarily the result of the enforcement of public policies and protocols put in place to control the spread of the Great Plague, of which the Roman defense became an active component.

## Defense Mechanisms

24 Paul Slack, *Plague: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 32.

In late seventeenth-century London, most of what we now know about the bubonic plague was unfamiliar. The medical explanation of the plague was based on a combination of individual predisposition (the "humors" of the body) and theories of contagion (physical contact and "miasmas"). A further, fundamental component in the early modern epidemiology of the plague was geography.<sup>24</sup> It was in the "pestered places" of suburban London that plague was known to proliferate, and it was there that it had to be confined. However, urban containment measures were, in reality, difficult to enforce. A system of *cordons sanitaires* established between the outer parishes of London in early 1665 was soon abandoned, as it became clear that the plague could easily travel through it. Similarly, the establishment of large pest-houses in the outskirts of the city, despite being a useful and official procedure, was never carried out.<sup>25</sup>

25 Alanson L. Moote and Dorothy C. Moote, *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 14.

In the end, the primary systems employed to counter the spread of the Great Plague were quarantine and eviction. Both were often carried out as a preventive measure and followed unwritten customs. The vast suburban working class inhabiting London's "pestered places" was the first to be isolated, frequently without a diagnosis and solely as a precautionary measure. Humble clothing and other illnesses became signifiers of the plague-ridden, who were forcibly confined to their homes by inexperienced, publicly employed "searchers." In addition, potentially "dangerous" individuals were also pushed out of the perimeter of the Wall and into the outer parishes. On July 4, 1665, the Lord Mayor of the City issued the following order to the Aldermen of the wards:

*"That a carefull Watch and Ward be constantly kept at the Gates and Landing Places, to restrain and prevent the ingress of all Vagrants, Beggars, Loose and Dangerous people, from the out parts into this City and Liberties; and to bring to punishment such as shall be apprehended doing the same, according to Law."*<sup>26</sup>

26 Quoted in Charles J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), 171.

Already a political artifact, establishing the systems of governance between the wealthier City and London's poorer



neighborhoods, in the summer of 1665 the London Wall was made into a contamination shield. The protective nature of the Wall became reactivated in official containment protocols, with inevitable repercussions for London's social body. The high mortality of the disease, combined with its unpredictability and association with poverty, turned the City into a sort of fortified citadel, where control and health were maintained through segregation and removal. Entrances to the City were patrolled by armed "watchers," usually employed only during times of conflict, with access generally granted only to the wealthy few. In the orders of 1646, which were adopted again in 1665, it was similarly established that "no wandering beggars be suffered in the streets of this city, in any fashion or manner whatsoever."<sup>27</sup> Unemployment and homelessness were crucially linked to the spread of diseases.<sup>28</sup> Plague victims had to be secluded not only for a matter of health and safety but also to maintain public order. While in Stuart London rudimentary systems of social welfare and charity were present, their effects were often limited.<sup>29</sup> The poor and unemployed were often seen as menacing carriers of both physical disease and moral decay, and as such their movement had to be limited and circumscribed. The presence of disease, it has been suggested, could be systematized into public procedures of close observation and detailed seclusion, meant not only to "purify" the early modern city but to exercise centralized supervision and close monitoring.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the plague turned a pre-existing popular perception into a policy, of which the Wall became the ideal facilitator as a sort of mass-scale "social-distancer." As Paul Slack puts it, "what plague did was to exaggerate features of the demographic scene which would not without it have been so obvious."<sup>31</sup>

If the black rat was the primary carrier of the disease, the articulation of its impact upon the city was man-made. By moving towards defensive strategies to control the pandemic, what was previously an unnoticeable dimension of the London Wall expedited military forms of isolation and forced displacement which in turn shaped the progress of the epidemic.

## Under Siege

Like other notable cases, such as Rome and Naples, the plague was seen, essentially, as an enemy.<sup>32</sup> Earlier in the century, the Elizabethan writer Thomas Dekker talked of "the cannon of the Pestilence," insisting on the military dimension of contagion.<sup>33</sup> Plague was an invader, and it had to be defeated by activating systems of urban defense, such as the "watchers". This "process" aligned itself with the common early modern project of isolating sickness,

<sup>27</sup> *Orders Conceived and Published by the Lord Major and Aldermen of the City of London, Concerning the Infection of the Plague* (London: James Flesher, 1665), 12.

<sup>28</sup> Harding, "Population of London," 32.

<sup>29</sup> Wilbur K. Jordan, *Philanthropy in England, 1480–1660: A Study of the Changing Pattern of English Social Aspirations* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1959), 47.

<sup>30</sup> Alan McKinlay, "Foucault, Plague, Defoe," *Culture and Organization* 15, no. 2 (2009), 167–84, here 174.

<sup>31</sup> Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 187.

<sup>32</sup> Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 153.

34 Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 308; Robin Evans, "The Rights of Retreat and the Rites of Exclusion: Notes Towards the Definition of Wall," in *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Writings* (London: Architectural Association, 2003), 35–54.

35 Henry Wheatley, ed. *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, vol. 8 (Boston: Francis A. Nicolls, 1896), 407.

36 Defoe, *Journal*, 6.

37 Defoe, *Journal*, 19.

38 Copeland, "Defoe and the London Wall," 413.

39 Mark S. R. Jenner, "Plague on a Page: Lord Have Mercy Upon Us in Early Modern London," *The Seventeenth Century* 27, no. 3 (2012), 255–86, here 269.

fig. 6 Woodcut from *Londons Loud Cryes to the Lord by Prayer*, 1665  
Source: British Library

idleness, and insanity. 34 The defensive nature of the Wall then also became an active instrument in the popular perception of a "war on plague." On June 10, 1665 diarist Samuel Pepys heard "that the plague is come into the City (though it hath these three or four weeks since its beginning been wholly out of the City)." 35 The event was noteworthy, as the City was evidently considered the safest place to be. Defoe similarly noted how discouraging it was when, at the beginning of May, "to the great Affliction of the City, one died within the Walls." 36 In his novel, we read of the exact moment when the plague breached through and "the City itself began now to be visited too, I mean within the Walls." 37

The "political and mystic powers" projected by Pepys and Defoe onto the Wall was a common topos during times of plague. 38 For instance, the 1665 *Londons Loud Cryes*, a widespread medical, religious, and statistical broadsheet also known as *Lord have Mercy Upon Us*, was accompanied by an eloquent woodcut, previously used during the plague of 1636. 39 fig. 6 London is represented as a unified assemblage of houses standing behind the Wall. Outside, after a single row of houses, an empty land



opens in the foreground, suggesting the vastness of a battlefield, with citizens fleeing, priests praying, and the powerful image of Death itself besieging the citadel. Instead of the unregulated and fast-growing built panorama of suburban London, the illustration offers the idealized portrait of a closed-off, clearly defined enclosure protected by the Wall. Access through one



of the gates, shown on the left side of the picture, is guarded by “watchers,” who can also be seen patrolling the territory around the City.

This image of London as a citadel reflected a common perception of the City as a heavily guarded place of safety, existing within London but otherwise fully separate from it. As already suggested in Hollar’s survey, the City could be construed as an “island,” immobile and secure behind the perimeter of the Wall. In fact, this perception was powerful enough to shape popular behavior. Exodus, for example, which from the earliest signs of the plague was a desirable option for those who could afford it, became a compromise between the risk of contagion and the protection provided by the Wall. During the summer of 1665, an estimated two hundred thousand people fled London, the largest mass migration in the capital’s history.<sup>40</sup> Even then, the Wall, it was thought, would protect the gentry who lived in the City. Defoe noted how:

<sup>40</sup> Moote, *The Great Plague*, 89.

*“The City, and those other Parts, notwithstanding the great Numbers of People that were gone into the Country, was vastly full of People, and perhaps the fuller, because People had for a long time a strong Belief, that the Plague would not come into the City.”*<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Defoe, *Journal*, 219.

According to Defoe, during the months of the plague, the infrastructural presence of the London Wall became intertwined with the primordial imaginary of an autonomous entity, an imposing institutional presence that promised continuity by the mere fact of its antiquity.

As Defoe noted, the plague had a profound impact on London’s built environment. It altered “the face” of the entire city, displacing its people, emptying its streets, shutting off its houses, and closing its gates. As a landmark of sovereignty, the Wall was a substantial filter through which the people of London perceived and experienced this new city. The part that the Wall came to play was also a magnification of pre-existing paradigms. As Slack puts it, “plague simply exaggerated an established feature of metropolitan life.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Slack, *Impact of Plague*, 160.

The territorial autonomy of the City of London, emerging from Hollar’s survey as a subtext to his clearly bordered map, was a tacit political fact. During the summer of 1665, it became a visible urban mechanism against contagion, visually delineated in the explicit military analogies of *Londons Loud Cryes*. The “changing face” of London noted by Defoe identified a movement in the meaning of the Wall that restored its ancient veiled attributes once more. The progressive growth of suburban London had softened the Wall from a military installation into an infrastructure,

deeply associated with administration, governance, and urbanity. Through the immutable presence of the Wall, the City within was crystallized and preserved as a steadfast entity, existing almost in opposition to the everchanging suburbs of London. Already an administrative “island” with its own governmental authority, social and demographic identity, and urban character, during the months of the Great Plague, the City again turned into a fortified citadel. In being adopted to enforce the politics of seclusion and isolation, the Wall provided the suggestive image of a protected enclave, almost a Noah’s Ark. The Roman structure reacquired its ancestral *raison d’être* from the catastrophe; it had been reactivated to become a key component of epidemic containment strategies and in the City’s evolving capacity for social control. <sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> In the aftermath of the plague, and especially after the Great Fire of 1666, the Wall was slowly but consistently taken down as a consequence of the City’s growing jurisdiction and of London’s massive urban expansion. Hobley, “Archaeology,” 13.