

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Dancing Plague of 1518

By Doug MacGowan
2011

The Dancing Plague of 1518 was a strange case of mass hysteria in Strasbourg, a village in present-day France. Hundreds of people in this tiny region were overcome by a sudden urge to dance—to the brink of extreme exhaustion and sometimes death. As you read, take notes on the various causes or explanations the author provides for the Dancing Plague of 1518.

- [1] For no apparent reason, she just started to dance.

In July of 1518, in full view of her neighbors, Frau¹ Troffea began to violently dance in the streets of the city of Strasbourg, France. There was no music and her face betrayed no expression of joy. She appeared unable to stop herself from her frenzy.

Had this remained an isolated² incident, the city elders may have put it down to madness or demonic possession, but soon after Troffea began her dancing, a neighbor joined in. And then another. By the end of a week more than 30 people were dancing night and day on the streets of the city. And it didn't stop there. By the time a month had passed, at least 400 citizens of Strasbourg were swept up in the phenomenon.³

Medical and civic⁴ authorities were called in once some of the dancers began dying from heart attacks, exhaustion, or strokes. For some inexplicable⁵ reason, these men believed that the cure for the dancing was more dancing, so they erected a wooden stage for the dancers and musicians were called in.



"Die Wallfahrt der Fallsuechtigen nach Meulebeeck" by Pieter Brueghel the Elder is in the public domain.

- [5] This all sounds like some archaic⁶ bit of folklore, but the dancing plague of 1518 is clearly chronicled⁷ in medical, civic, and religious notes of the time.

Modern researchers pour over those notes to develop theories as to what caused this bizarre⁸ incident.

1. the German word for Mrs.
2. **Isolated** (*adjective*) far away from other places, buildings, or people; remote
3. **Phenomenon** (*noun*) a fact or situation whose cause or explanation is in question or a mystery
4. of or relating to a city or town, especially its administration
5. **Inexplicable** (*adjective*) unable to be explained or accounted for
6. **Archaic** (*adjective*) very old or old-fashioned
7. **Chronicle** (*verb*) to record (a series of events) in a factual and detailed way
8. **Bizarre** (*adjective*) very strange or unusual

One of those theories postulates⁹ that the dancers were the victims of mass hysteria:¹⁰ instances when more than one person believes they are afflicted¹¹ by an identical malady¹²—often during times of extreme stress within the affected community. The Strasbourg incident occurred during a time of rampant¹³ famine¹⁴ and malnutrition¹⁵ and subsequent¹⁶ deaths. But 400 people? A well-known recent incident generally seen as an example of mass hysteria is 1962's "The Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic"¹⁷ which affected only 95 people.

A second theory is in the realm of agriculture.¹⁸ The condition called Ergotism occurs when grains of rye are attacked by a specific mold. Eating the infected rye can lead to seizures, although the movements of Strasbourg's afflicted looked much more like traditional dancing than seizures of any sort.¹⁹

A final school of thought states that the dancing was in result of some kind of religious ecstasy²⁰ caused by veneration²¹ of Saint Vitus, the patron saint of epilepsy.²²

[10] None of the theories completely explain the 1518 dancing.

Bit by bit the dancers stopped, and the dancing would end as mysteriously as it began.

"The Dancing Plague of 1518" from historicismysteries.com, © 2011, Doug MacGowan. Reprinted with permission, all rights reserved.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

-
9. **Postulate (verb)** to suggest or assume; to theorize
 10. Mass hysteria is a term used to describe when a collective fear and paranoia of threats, real or imagined, overtakes the behavior of a community.
 11. **Afflict (verb)** to cause pain or suffering
 12. an illness or disease
 13. **Rampant (adjective)** flourishing or spreading unchecked
 14. extreme lack of food
 15. lack of proper nutrition caused by not having enough to eat or not eating enough of the right things
 16. **Subsequent (adjective)** coming after; following
 17. "The Tanganyika Laughter Epidemic" was a 1962 outbreak of mass hysteria thought to have occurred near the village of Kashasha in the modern nation of Tanzania. It began with a couple of schoolchildren and quickly spread throughout the entire school, so much so that it was closed about a month later.
 18. the science or practice of farming
 19. Side effects of Ergotism also include: headaches, vomiting, diarrhea, gangrene of the fingers and toes, hallucinations, and mania. Ergot poisoning has also thought to have a part in the Salem Witch Trials, but this theory has largely been dismissed.
 20. an overwhelming feeling of great happiness or joyful excitement; bliss
 21. **Veneration (noun)** great respect; reverence
 22. a neurological disorder marked by sudden, repeated episodes of loss of consciousness and seizures/convulsions, associated with abnormal electrical activity in the brain