

# Creative Infestation: The Black Death as A Catalyst for The Emergence of Early Modernity in Western Europe

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## ABSTRACT

The fourteenth-century outbreak of Bubonic Plague, known as the Black Death, exerted a transformative impact upon Western Europe, facilitating the development of more empirical and observational forms of medicine and science, weakening the hold of the Catholic Church, and dealing a major blow to the feudalistic state organization and manorial economies. Western society after the Black Death would never look the same again. The Black Death should thus be viewed as laying the foundations of, and a major catalyst for, the emergence of modernity in Western Europe.

## Introduction

The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. I, Agnolo di Tura ... buried my five children with my own hands. ... And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.<sup>1</sup> — Agnolo di Tura, chronicler from Sienna, Italy, 1349

In October of 1347, twelve Genoese galleys pulled into the port of the city of Messina. They brought with them a Plague so virulent that if anyone so much as spoke to them, they ran the risk of infection.<sup>2</sup> Such was the Black Death, known at the time as the “Pestilence”, or the “Great Mortality.” Its name was an understatement. Within a decade, the disease had spread like wildfire throughout the entire continent of Europe and wiped out as much as half its population.<sup>3</sup> Unprecedented speeds of transmission paired with deadly virulence engulfed Europe. People would take out the bodies of their deceased neighbors in the same fashion modern citizens take out the trash every morning.<sup>4</sup> As the Florentine humanist Petrarch put it, “Oh happy posterity those who will not experience such abysmal woe—and who will look upon our testimony as fable.”<sup>5</sup> This was the deadliest pandemic disaster in recorded human history. The massive destruction begs the question: how, exactly, did Europe change in the aftermath of such a catastrophe?

This paper will first consider how, exactly, the Plague arrived and spread in Western Europe or Latin Christendom. It will then explain the disease’s specific effects, arguing that the Plague had a decisive impact by catalyzing and accelerating the transformation of Western Europe into a more intellectually diverse, healthier, and economically and socially less constrained group of increasingly centralized states. Importantly, this essay seeks to adopt a middle ground between the current trends in academic historiography of viewing the Plague of the fourteenth century as a decisive turning point in its own terms and the older view, which tended

to view the Plague primarily as a catalyst for long-term earlier developments.<sup>6</sup> In particular, medically, the Plague initiated a transformation in medieval medicine from one rooted in the philosophical past, to one based on empirical evidence and research, laying the foundations for the Scientific Revolution. Socio-economically, it pushed feudalism, a way of life that lasted for centuries, to the brink of collapse, significantly increasing the bargaining power of the lower classes and encouraging a shift towards wage-based employment. In the sphere of religion, it diminished the influence of Western Europe's most significant cultural institution, the Roman Catholic Church. Such impacts were all crucial to Western Europe's emergence into the modern era. The change in attitude towards science, transformation of feudal class structures, and reduced religious power laid the foundations of modern Western Europe, and this paper will show how.

## Forms and Spread of the Plague

The Black Death, attributed to the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* by modern scientists, comes in three forms, categorized by how it invades the body – bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. It was the Bubonic Plague that devastated Europe. The most notable symptom of the bubonic Plague is painful swellings of lymph nodes throughout the body, known as buboes, from which it gets its name. Fevers, headaches, and internal bleeding accompanied the swellings, and death often came three days after the first symptom.<sup>7</sup> The Plague was often transferred to man by fleas and rats.

Different theories concerning the origins and causes of the Plague have been advanced. The theory currently commanding widest acceptance, which has found recent support from genetic remains in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, suggests that with the *Yersinia Pestis* bacterium having long resided in colonies of marmots (a type of rodent) in the Tian Shan Mountains in Central Asia, climatic changes in the mid-fourteenth century caused such colonies to move closer to humans to whom they spread the Plague.<sup>8</sup> The greater intercourse and exchanges caused by the expansion of the Mongol Empire from Korea to Poland and its facilitation of the mass movement of soldiers and conquered peoples in turn facilitated the spread of the Plague across the Eurasian landmass. How exactly did the disease reach Europe? The best-known source of the first Plague contact between Asians and Europeans comes from Italian chronicler Gabrielle De Mussis. In 1347, a Mongol army had just abandoned its siege of the trading port of Caffa, as their men were suffering severely from the Plague.<sup>9</sup> Before retreating, however, they hurled rotten corpses of Plague victims over the walls of the town, hoping for the sickness to extinguish everyone inside. While uncorroborated, De Mussis' account of biological warfare as the cause of the Plague reaching Europe has generally been accepted, especially as the alternative potential vector – rat colonies in the Mongol encampment transferring the Plague – is unlikely given the likely distance of the encampment from Caffa's walls and rats' tendency not to move far from their nests.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, it is undisputed that the Plague both spread rapidly at Caffa, and spread from the Crimea to Europe.<sup>11</sup> In particular, during the outbreak in Caffa, some who thought themselves free of Plague took to their ships and fled the city. However, these refugees only made matters worse. As described by De Mussis, "When the sailors reached these places and mixed with the people there, it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence, and their inhabitants, both men and women, died immediately."<sup>12</sup> In particular, having spread the Plague at Constantinople in 1347, other Genoese ships spread the Plague to Sicily (in 1347), Genoa, Venice and other major Italian cities (1348), Spain, Portugal and England (1348), Germany, and Scandinavia as well as elsewhere in Europe (1348-50). The highly integrated trading networks of Europe in which Constantinople and the Italian maritime republics formed vital nodes ensured that having spread to one place, the Plague was quickly spread to others with which it traded.

## Medical Effects

When the Plague hit Europe for the first time in 1348, the medieval medical system encountered its greatest challenge yet. Although physicians tried everything in the books, they still failed to find a cure for the deadly disease. This was because pre-Plague medicine (both in Europe and also the Islamic World) was rooted in the Greek philosophical past (primarily the works of Galen and Aristotle); and its corpus of texts, hundreds of years old, had no solutions for this new challenge.<sup>13</sup> In addition, even top physicians had little training in anatomy and pathology. Furthermore, most surgeons had little to no practical skills in that area, as dissection was seen negatively by the church. Thus, when the medical profession was charged with the responsibility to protect the health of the people, they failed miserably. The Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani observed:

For this pestilential infirmity, doctors from every part of the world had no good remedy or effective cure, neither through natural philosophy, medicine, or the art of astrology. To gain money some went visiting and dispensing their remedies, but these only demonstrated through their patients' death that their art was nonsense and false.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to point out that medieval European medicine was not only based more on theory than practice and observation, but the Aristotelian and Galenic theories on which medicine was based utilized principles now viewed as incorrect. These included both the concept of "humors" and the so-called "miasma theory," according to which diseases such as Bubonic Plague were caused by *miasma* (bad airs) emanating from rotting organic matter.<sup>15</sup> The ineffective remedies referred to by Villani, including most commonly poultices, were based upon such inaccurate beliefs, including that the Plague had arisen from "poisonous vapors having been communicated by means of air breathed in and out," and therefore had little effectiveness.<sup>16</sup> Villani also indicates that confronted with the apparent uselessness of conventional cures, doctors during the Plague also turned to astrology (which in the fourteenth century was regarded as a science no less valid than pharmacology) in order to find a cure, which equally failed to yield results. As a result, university-trained physicians suffered a tremendous blow to their prestige, Galenic science proved futile in the face of the Plague, and medical education based on textual analysis ceased to be regarded as highly as it had been previously.<sup>17</sup> It is of course important not to exaggerate the positive impact of the Plague. In particular, the absence of a suitable alternative body of theory meant that Aristotelian and Galenic theories would continue to predominate. The miasma theory itself was not fully replaced in Europe until the 1880s (when it was finally supplanted by our current "germ theory"), and astrology would continue to be viewed as an analytically useful science for several centuries thereafter.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, by showing the weakness of theory largely untethered from practice and weakening the stultifying hold of theories almost two thousand years old, the Plague provided space for more empirical and practical forms of medicine to develop.

Such positive developments are particularly apparent in two areas: a diffusion of medical knowledge; and a more practical transformation of the medical profession.<sup>19</sup> These had several causes, one of the primary ones being that many of the leading physicians and medical writers had perished during the Plague, which opened the discipline to new ideas.<sup>20</sup> The increased threat of the Plague alongside a temporary dearth of professionals able to explain the Plague resulted in increased demand for publication of new medical texts in vernacular languages. This in turn allowed the laypeople and non-professional practitioners to acquire greater medical knowledge. Once the public gained access to the texts, pre-Plague medicine was demystified and some of its weaknesses were exposed. It became clear to the educated classes that change was imperative if the Plague was to be controlled.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, surgery, a less theoretical and more observational form of medicine, received a boost from the Plague. Prior to the outbreak, dissections had been forbidden by both the Church and medical authorities, and as a result, professional surgeons (as distinct from the largely illiterate and even more despised barber-surgeons) were considered to have far lower status in comparison to physicians due to professional stigma.<sup>22</sup> However, in the fourteenth century, French surgeon Guy de Chauliac was able to receive permission from the Pope to dissect bodies in an attempt to identify the cause of the Plague.<sup>23</sup> This was a momentous step for the rise of surgery, as it removed the stigma imposed by the Church.<sup>24</sup> Although Chauliac was ultimately unsuccessful, his contribution to surgery had been noted. Now that surgery was socially acceptable, people

turned away from the failed theoretical university-based medicine, and towards practical and experience-based surgery.<sup>25</sup> Universities realized this as well; they incorporated anatomy and surgery into medical education, and made dissections occur more frequently and meticulously.<sup>26</sup>

The increasing significance of surgery also shifted the emphasis of medical study from philosophy to physical science, which would eventually (albeit gradually) birth the concept of scientific method through an increased emphasis on direct observation, and would lead to modern experimental science in the seventeenth century.<sup>27</sup> Outside of universities, the value of surgery rose all across Europe. Chauliac's *Surgery* and John Arderne's *Practica* became some of the most widely read of all post-Plague medical books; in June of 1348, the rulers of Florence allowed surgeons to conduct autopsies on Plague victims; and between 1352 and 1362, boards of surgeons were established in London to regulate surgical activities in the city.<sup>28</sup> By 1400, surgeons across Europe were recognized, alongside physicians, as members of the medical profession.<sup>29</sup>

Another major development was the role of hospitals. Before the Plague, hospitals were designed to isolate the diseased, so they did not spread their illness further (resembling modern hospices more than modern hospitals). They offered little help to the patients, and the sick were treated as if they were already dead.<sup>30</sup> Their property would be disposed of and no one would expect to see them again. After the Plague, however, a substantial number of hospitals began to attempt to cure their patients. Many even developed associations with doctors to make medical improvements. For example, one of the major hospitals in Bury St. Edmunds established an internship program for medical students of Cambridge University.<sup>31</sup> By 1450, the rest of the town's hospitals had all established connections with local physicians, a pattern which became increasingly common throughout Europe.<sup>32</sup> The Black Death had permanently altered the goals of hospitals, where they became committed to the cure rather than isolation.

Public health was also greatly improved after the Black Death, especially, and most effectively, in the Italian city-state republics, whose policies were gradually imitated elsewhere. As authorities came to realize that deplorable sanitary services led to higher rates of infection, the concept of a centrally controlled board of public health became common in many parts of the continent. A particularly important policy innovation resulting from such health boards was the institution of quarantine policies in Venice, where crews of ships wanting to enter the city had to first wait for a *quaranta* or period of forty days (from which our current word quarantine derives) on the island of San Lorenzo. While the period of forty days was derived from the Bible, rather than scientific observation, the policy's demonstrable effectiveness (as forty days is longer than the period required for Plague victims to show symptoms) made a significant contribution to reducing the impact of the Plague and other epidemics in future.<sup>33</sup> Apart from Venice, one of the most effective such boards, Milan's, was given sweeping powers and responsibilities.<sup>34</sup> Such boards took charge of inspecting the quality of food markets, and controlling sanitization in hospitals, inns, burials, and drug productions. Although these boards were unable to prevent the Plague (as it was too infectious), they were able to make public health a common concern in most of Europe's urban centers by the sixteenth century and helped mitigate (even if only slightly) the worst impact of the Plague.<sup>35</sup> The extension of such public health concerns to states outside of Italy, such as England, can be seen for instance in royal regulations imposed on butchers in the City of London in 1371, in which the dumping of entrails was regulated, and in which Edward III observed:

The air in the city has lately been greatly corrupted and infected by the slaughtering of animals in the city, because of the putrefied blood running in the streets and the dumping of entrails in the river Thames, and as a result...sicknesses and other maladies have befallen residents and visitors to the city.<sup>36</sup>

Although the king's concern over the air of the city as a cause of disease shows the continuing dominance of the (scientifically incorrect) miasma theory of disease, such mistaken beliefs in the Plague's vectors clearly were capable of inspiring measures that (if followed) nonetheless had an appreciable impact in improving public health and cleanliness. Similarly, while the king himself would observe that the regulations were not being obeyed, awareness of such non-feasance and further attempts to ensure compliance strengthened the capacity of local government to enforce such regulation. Ultimately, the long-term impact of such a burgeoning

concern for public health and the attempt to develop more effective methods would be seen in the effective end of the threat of Plague achieved in Europe at the start of the eighteenth century, whereas Plague would continue to be a major concern in Asia and the non-western world up until the early twentieth century.<sup>37</sup>

Professional deontology, or medical ethics similarly underwent a transformation, which in turn facilitated further scientific advances. Physicians and medical practitioners set moral codes that dictated how a professional medic should act. Guy De Chauliac advised that doctors should abhor false cures, be affable to the sick, kindhearted to his colleagues, and wise in his prognostications.<sup>38</sup> John of Ardene advocated high standards of dress, along with professional courtesy and speech that are short, fair, and reasonable.<sup>39</sup> Most importantly, all medical practitioners agreed that it was important to maintain prestige and good income. Indeed, many became a financial elite after the Black Death. The physician of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* typifies this:

And yet he was right chary of expense,  
He kept the gold he kept from pestilence,  
For gold in physic is a fine cordial,  
And therefore loved he gold exceedingly all.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that even members of the up-and-coming elite like Chaucer, who might otherwise be expected to be wary about attacking the social hierarchy felt free to make such depictions suggests that skeptical views of the clergy were held across a wide cross-section of English society.

Finally, and more broadly, the Black Death helped to greatly weaken (albeit not destroying) the hold of Thomism, the philosophical synthesis propounded by Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), in which it was believed that theology and the natural sciences were both able to shed light on each other and that God's revelations could be explained by natural reason and vice-versa. Thomism was thus an "intellectual dead end" that: failed to perceive the necessity for quantification in determining natural processes. It had no inkling of the crucial importance of experimentation. It was burdened with a strictly observational and rhetorical approach to science and furthermore remained specifically committed to Aristotle's error-driven physics.<sup>41</sup>

The terrifying power of the Plague, in contrast, suggested an arbitrary and totally incomprehensible deity. Its intellectual effect was thus to strengthen the approach of individuals such as William of Ockham (1287-1347) and Thomas Bradwardine (1300-49), who believing in their inability to comprehend God's terrible purposes, instead advocated a much more ground-up approach, beginning with the quantification of observations of small phenomena, a necessary precursor to the creation of the scientific method.<sup>42</sup>

To conclude, post-Plague medicine was still far from modern medicine, but it already contained the foundations of what it would eventually become. The Plague catalyzed a long-needed renovation of the medical system, from one rooted in the philosophical past to one focused on a more practical and empirical future. Surgery and anatomy, now more socially acceptable, opened the doors to understanding the secrets of the human body and incremental increases in knowledge and effective cures. The revised role of hospitals and improvements of public health continue to benefit Western Europe, and the rise of medical ethics established medical practitioners as elite members of society, which remains true to today. In addition, through the emphasis of empirical science, post-Plague medicine also paved the way to the scientific revolution.<sup>43</sup> All in all, the Plague's medical impact on Western Europe was crucial to its emergence into the future.

## Social Effects

Prior to the onset of the Plague, much of Western Europe (especially outside of the Italian city states) was dominated by a hierarchical socio-political system, based upon land holding and duties of service, conventionally referred to as feudalism (although current historians often now shy away from this term, viewing it as overly simplistic).<sup>44</sup> The economies of such "feudal" societies in particular often constituted a system known as "manorialism," in which unfree peasant workers, known as serfs, in exchange for land and protection directly labored on lords' estates, provided other in-kind services, and were prohibited from moving.<sup>45</sup> However, this

way of life was arguably inefficient and wasteful, as it reduced the incentives of peasantry to develop the land and limited the development of labor markets. Moreover, although some medieval peasants were able to improve their station during the Middle Ages, particularly when seeking to move to a higher station within their own class (as opposed to rising into a different class), social mobility on the whole remained considerably limited.<sup>46</sup> Such may be seen in the condemnation offered by one fourteenth-century philosopher, for any one: ceaselessly labors to acquire riches, either in order to obtain a higher social position...or that his sons may become men of wealth and importance—all such are incited by a damnable avarice, sensuality, or pride.<sup>47</sup>

While certainly not denying that such individuals could exist, Henry's observations indicate that social climbing was frowned upon and marginal rather than something which could reasonably be expected. Likewise, manorial lords in practice often endured few constraints (apart from those imposed by prudence) on their ability to exploit their serfs.<sup>48</sup> Such features of the fourteenth-century social systems imposed upon peasants resulted in significant resentment as would be seen in the aftermath of the Black Death during the so-called Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381 and the Jacquerie in France in 1351.<sup>49</sup>

Overall, the mortality of the Black Death had a pronouncedly greater impact upon the lower classes (including urban proletarians and peasants) than social elites. This was observed by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75), a first-hand observer of the Plague, in one of the short stories in his *Decameron*:

As for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie, they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained, either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in their thousands, and since they had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception.<sup>50</sup>

This induced a shortage of manpower that changed the economic structure of Europe. Due to the vast death toll of the lower class, the wealthy no longer had enough peasants to work for them. For the first time in centuries, workers were mobile enough to move from one manor to the next if they were unhappy with their living conditions, so short was the supply of labor.<sup>51</sup> The result was a rise in status of the lower class. Serfs, freemen, artisans, and church workers were no longer tied to their rulers; they now had the freedom to work for whomever paid the highest wages.<sup>52</sup> A chronicler in Rochester, England observed that because of the new economic conditions, "the humble turned up their noses at employment, and could scarcely be persuaded to serve the eminent [the upper class] unless for triple wages."<sup>53</sup> In order to lure workers from other areas, lords had to promise good payment, better working conditions, housing, food, and lower rent. With their rising status, serfs would often demand, and receive, oxen and fertilizer to be more productive.<sup>54</sup> Many serfs even became landowners themselves, which had been difficult prior to the Plague. This increase in power and wealth of the lower class virtually ended feudalism in Western Europe, and catalyzed the decline everywhere else, as the peasants could prosper and acquire a higher status in relation to their lords.<sup>55</sup>

Shortfalls in labor also sparked human inventiveness and development of new forms of technology, as people sought technological solutions to the issues presented by the labor shortage. For example, new windmills and watermills were innovated in parts of Europe to replace human labor.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the shortage of scribes stimulated the invention of the movable-type printing press.<sup>57</sup> In the fishing industry, Dutch fishermen perfected the method of salting, drying, and storing their catch aboard the ship, which allowed them to stay at sea longer, and bring home more fish.<sup>58</sup> In the words of Gottfried, "Shortage was the mother of medieval invention."<sup>59</sup>

The Black Death had a similarly transformative impact on relations between classes in regions of Western Europe where feudalism did not predominate, such as Italy. Indeed the highly urbanized nature of Italian society meant that social conflict in Italy was often concentrated in the towns. For instance, in the city of Florence, almost sixty percent (around 70,000 out of a pre-Plague population of 120,000) died between 1338 and 1351.<sup>60</sup> As with serfs demanding better conditions, in Italy formally free laborers used the decreased supply of labor to demand better pay and when denied it, often rose in rebellion as with the so-called Ciompi Revolt in Florence from 1378 to 1382, which was led by urban workers outside the privileged circles of the guilds.<sup>61</sup> The revolt led to a radical experiment in government in which the rebels, often consisting of wool workers and

other working class elements ran the city government for several years. While this working class regime was brief it not only made future governments of Florence wary about alienating lower classes by allowing excessive exploitation, it also left an important intellectual legacy. In particular, subsequent figures such as Machiavelli and nineteenth century leaders of Italian nationalism would see in this revolt a harbinger of democracy.<sup>62</sup>

In conclusion, the drastic shortage of labor caused by the Plague's death toll on the lower classes resulted in several social changes in Western Europe. To be sure, feudalism and serfdom had both been gradually weakening for several generations already by the time the Plague struck, due to the immense burgeoning markets in Western Europe; however, the Plague acted as an immense catalyst, intensifying the impact of such forces and hastening a process that otherwise would have required many more generations.<sup>63</sup> The most prominent effect was to undermine the manorial economy and other aspects of feudalism, a way of life that had in various forms existed since Late Antiquity (and could well have lasted many more), and in many places bring it to the brink of collapse. This undermined pre-Plague Europe's economic imbalance and liberated the lower class from the feudal bonds that held them in near slavery, allowing them to attain wealth. Such effects, it must be noted, were not inevitable, and could only come about because of a significant amount of organization amongst tradesmen and peasants in Western Europe together with sovereigns militarily independent of local nobilities. This, in particular, may be seen in the opposite effect of the Plague in Europe east of the Elbe River, where the scarcity of labor resulted in a protracted class conflict in which victorious landlords were ultimately able to impose upon a previously free (but unorganized) peasantry, the so-called "Second Serfdom."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, paradoxically it was attempts by the English state to strengthen its administration and control over society to reinforce the prevailing feudal social order that also facilitated the continuing weakening of feudalism in England. In particular, while some historians have tended to view the Plague as weakening administration especially in the short-term, a more common view among scholars, especially on the longer term impact of the Plague is that the state was strengthened, a conclusion that is likely valid for the rest of Western Europe.<sup>65</sup> Another consequence of the labor shortage was the rise of new forms of technology. Some innovations developed had huge impacts on European social life, like the movable-type printing press leading a crucial role in the Protestant Reformation. At the same time, new labor-saving devices, in combination with emancipation and higher wages, permanently improved the living conditions of the Plague survivors. The leftover wealth would also be used to explore artistic and scientific advances in the centuries to come.

## Religious Impacts

The Black Death exerted major impacts on the life of the mind in Western Europe, and one of the belief systems and institutions most damaged by the Plague was the Roman Catholic Church. Before the Plague, the Church had been Europe's most significant cultural institution for over a thousand years. The Black Death damaged the unity of Latin Christendom by exacerbating theological divides, weakening the Church's influence on some of the laity by motivating individuals to criticize its structure and the reputations of its officials (although paradoxically strengthening the faith of some others). It shook the laypeople's faith in the Church through the hopeless hardships it inflicted upon society, and the apparent powerlessness of prayer or other religious means of abating the Plague. After the Black Death, the relationship between the Church and European society was forever changed, and this consequence would remain even after outbreaks of the Plague had ceased.

Since the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Catholic Church had been growing in power and authority. By the fourteenth century, it provided spiritual guidance to virtually all Western Europeans (save for its Jewish minority) and had for long dominated important social functions, including education, healthcare, legislation on marriage, as well as being highly influential in politics (both through the international influence of the Papacy as well as the influence of powerful ecclesiastics within states).<sup>66</sup> Catholic dogma in particular formed the basis of education. However, it is important to point out that despite the unity of belief, religion in the Middle Ages was a mixed blessing. In particular, while it was the Church that had mainly preserved literacy

during the preceding early middle ages, and the Church remained the primary patron of scholars and learning, as well as being mainly responsible for the creation of practically all Western European schools and universities, the Church's prohibition of writings that contradicted formal teachings could on occasion limit free inquiry.<sup>67</sup>

When the Plague struck, the predominant response by society had been to seek solace and hope in the prayers led by bishops and the clergy, because the pestilence was understood as a punishment from God.<sup>68</sup> Gabriele de Mussis imagined God having "looked down from on high upon the entire human race and saw it sinking and sliding into all kinds of wickedness."<sup>69</sup> However, as the Plague continued to wreak havoc, many believers of the Christian faith began to question the Church. They couldn't understand why God turned a blind eye to all their prayers. Nor could they understand why the priests had failed to warn them of this incoming mortality.<sup>70</sup> Francesco Petrarch, a leading author at the time, proposed:

For so it is with us that Your forbearance, God, has slackened little by little toward human crimes... and You, the best traveler, no longer able to support us, throw us onto Your back and in Your anger avert Your eyes of mercy from us. What if we are making atonement not just for our crimes, but also for those of our fathers, whether these be worse I do not know, but certainly they were more pitiable. Or could it be perhaps that certain great truths are to be held suspect, that God does not care for mortal men?<sup>71</sup>

This growing mistrust in the Catholic Church provoked different reactions within society. Some took religious matters into their own hands by practicing public self-flagellation, believing that atoning for their sins would repel the Plague, while demanding (alongside less extreme adherents of the view that sin had caused the Plague) that individuals authorities strive harder to live by God's law. In particular, amongst such believers there emerged an increasingly chiliastic or eschatological focus, in which even church authorities gradually came to accept the belief that the world was nearing its end and the Second Coming was nigh.<sup>72</sup>

Some abandoned Christianity as a whole and joined cults that championed new beliefs.<sup>73</sup> Religious reformers around Europe even began to directly challenge church authority. For example, John Wycliffe (1328-84) and his followers translated the Bible from Latin to English, which allowed his countrymen to read it for themselves, without having to rely on the authority of Catholic officials.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, not content with mere vernacular translations (to which the Church did not formally object), Wycliffe and his followers (known as Lollards) adopted increasingly heretical beliefs (which were reflected in later editions of his translation leading to its proscription) attacking the necessity of sacraments, cult of saints, ministerial priesthood and other aspects of Catholic belief which had seemingly been proven powerless or ineffective in the presence of the Plague. Testifying to their timeliness and persuasive power, Wycliffe's ideas would influence the so-called Hussites in Bohemia and result in the destructive Hussite Wars (1419-34). The Black Death severely damaged the authority of the church, and its impact on medieval religion did not end there.

In addition to the defections in followers, the Church suffered from a shortage in clergy. Before the onset of the Plague, the total number of monks, nuns, and friars in the religious houses throughout England was around 17,500.<sup>75</sup> According to surveys of English dioceses such as Norwich, Exeter and Winchester, around fifty percent of the recorded priests died.<sup>76</sup> Such records in better attested regions have led historians such as Philip Ziegler to claim that "Not far short of half these appear to have perished in the two years of the epidemic; probably more than half the friars and rather less than half the monks and nuns."<sup>77</sup> Besides the death toll, many parish priests fled, which left no one to offer services, deliver last rites, and comfort the sick.<sup>78</sup> An observer in England (himself a bishop) observed in 1349 that "parish churches have for a long time remained unserved, and the cures (of souls) there are in danger of being almost abandoned, to the grave peril of souls."<sup>79</sup> Such flight or absence from sacraments was especially damaging to religious faith, given the highly sacramental nature of medieval Catholic religion in which it was widely believed that denial of the sacraments could doom individuals to ages of suffering in purgatory. With such absence of ecclesiastics from religious services, the already weakened church faced harsh criticism. The priesthood was castigated for cowardice, greed, and impotence.<sup>80</sup> The church suffered both internally, and externally. This ultimately resulted in a growing alienation between clergy



and laity, which could (as with Wycliffe) develop into a theology denying the legitimacy of a priesthood separate from other believers.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, an unfortunately long-lasting impact of the Plague was the increase in anti-Semitism, a development which would continue into modern Europe and culminate in the tragedy of the Holocaust. One historian in particular has characterized the anti-Semitism that emerged during the Black Death as a “point of no return.”<sup>82</sup> In particular, throughout the period of the Plague, Jews were increasingly blamed for its outbreak, either because God was allegedly punishing communities which tolerated them, or (more frequently) because local communities viewed the Plague as a Jewish conspiracy designed to destroy Christians. In particular, from 1348, allegations that Jews had deliberately spread the Plague began to emerge in France and elsewhere in Latin Christendom and by 1351 such accusations had left records in at least a hundred locales.<sup>83</sup> With the general decline in the powers of pre-existing authorities, waves of popular, anti-Semitic violence spread throughout Europe during the period of the Plague, exciting hostilities which would continue for many centuries thereafter in the same locales.<sup>84</sup>

Such accusations and the response of authorities represented a significant change in preceding patterns of Western European anti-Semitism. Notwithstanding long-term prejudice against Jews as well as legal disabilities imposed upon them, throughout the Middle Ages, Church and secular authorities had, usually with more success than failure, generally limited riots, pogroms and the worst forms of anti-Jewish violence. Such approaches are apparent in the initial denunciation of pogroms made by secular authorities, such as Pedro IV of Aragon, who called one outbreak of violence motivated by a “diabolic spirit,” “evil,” and “madness.”<sup>85</sup> Similarly, in 1348, Pope Clement VI issued a bull requiring that persecution of the Jews desist, albeit to little avail. However, faced with the Plague-induced search for scapegoats and popular suspicions and ferment, authorities often found it impossible to resist popular demands for persecution. Thus, according to a local chronicler from Strasbourg, when the local bishop and mayor “strove to protect the Jews...it was of no use in the face of the clamor of the mob.”<sup>86</sup> The persistence of the Plague and repeated outbreaks facilitated the persistence of such accusations and transformed the persecution of Jews, enabling it to take on an institutional form. For instance, accusations of Jewish poisoning as the cause of the Plague were increasingly litigated in courts. According to one scholar such “persecutions began to precede the advent of the sickness and there was time for legal processes—kangaroo courts that gave official and moral sanction to the atrocities, helping to counter the bull of Pope Clement, which had forbidden the killing of Jews without judicial sentence.”<sup>87</sup> Alongside increasing official toleration or sanctioning of such anti-Semitic violence, during the Plague, wealthier strata (who had previously rarely engaged in anti-Semitism) also increasingly joined the lower class mobs or egged them on. For instance, in Augsburg, leading citizens who were in debt to Jewish moneylenders assisted the mob, utilizing the riots as a means to eliminate their creditors and thereby solve financial difficulties.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, although the effects of the Plague on religion did not directly incite the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, the Plague played a vital role in allowing it to emerge. Not only did the Plague weaken the social and intellectual hold of the Church, but it also enabled the rise of “proto-Protestants” such as Wycliffe and Jan Huss, whom Luther and Calvin would view as precursors. Such developments were only made possible through the environment created by the Plague. The church was still a rather powerful institution in the late fourteenth century, but it was clear that the power and influence “which it had used to exercise over its members was never to be recovered.”<sup>89</sup> The Black Death had exposed the fragility of the church and forever weakened its hold on European society.

## Conclusion

Fourteenth-century European society possessed several characteristics that distinguished it from its socio-economic form in succeeding centuries. To begin with, the social structure was slow to change. Economic imbalance limited opportunities for social advancement among the lower classes, and an order in which the rich were

able to exploit a relatively stratified social system, while the poor suffered significant limits on their freedoms was fixed in place. In addition, the overwhelming power of religion imposed limits on scholarship, and everything from natural diseases to starry skies were explained by explanations from the Bible. Ignorance was prevalent in society, people only had access to the information given by the Church. At the time of the Plague, countless unrealistic, incorrect medical ideas prevailed in Medieval Europe, yet they were championed by leading physicians.<sup>20</sup> To make matters worse, scientific exploration was forbidden unless the Church authority was diminished, which was impossible in accordance to the amount of power it held at the time. In other words, fourteenth century Europe was in a state of inflexibility, and a strong catalyst was required for it to break free.

This is where the Black Death comes in. Despite decimating the European population and wreaking havoc across the land, it was a dramatic catalyst for change. The shortage of labor caused by the massive death toll on the lower class toppled the economic inequality of medieval Europe, and social mobility was at its highest since the collapse of Rome. The damage dealt on clergy and the reputation of the Church severely weakened its hold over society, allowing for the birth of revolutionary ideas. The Plague also exposed the flaws of traditional “science”, which centered around ancient Greek philosophy. This, combined with weakened religious authority, gave physicians and medical practitioners the incentive to dive into new scientific explorations. Thus emerged the rise of surgery and anatomy, which led to new discoveries in medical science that would give birth to chemistry, physics, and the Scientific Revolution.<sup>21</sup>

All in all, when the Plague left, Europe was significantly and permanently reformed. The lower classes led better lives with opportunities at every corner; the Catholic Church was not as dominant as before, while substantial space had been opened up for intellectual diversity and greater freedom of ideas; it became apparent to many that their sciences were ineffective or based on erroneous assumptions and needed renovation, which began almost immediately. With the help of the Plague, the gears of Europe began to accelerate more rapidly than ever before. They would begin to spin faster and faster into the future.

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