



# Prefix

One universal human experience “

*Augustus, perhaps you'd like to share your fears with the group.”... “I fear oblivion,” he said without a moment's pause. “I fear it like the proverbial blind man who's afraid of the dark.” ... And I fear that I won't get either a life or a death that means anything.”<sup>1</sup>-  
John Green 2015*

Death “the great equaliser” it is the one universal experience every human who has ever lived or ever will live must confront; it is a constant in a world of change. Death is a fact of life; it has never changed; what has is how we deal with it.

As Historians, we usually work with death or rather dead people. We look at how people lived, how they died and what they left behind. Our predecessors’ lives shaped the world we live in today; death and memorials are a rather significant part of any historian’s field of study. I am fascinated by history because it is both universal and individual, both foreign and familiar.

For my thesis I chose to focus on the late medieval period in Europe, because of the inescapability of the Black Death. I wanted to know what effects this horrifying universal experience had on the people of Europe. Through my researched I learned about the long-lasting effects our disease riddled past has had on the formation of modern society. Ironically, whilst I was writing my thesis on the consequences of disease, a world-spanning pandemic, Covid-19, hit my community, not to mention the rest of the world. That is the nature of pandemics; they spread far, wide, and repeatedly. How will this influence our global economy, travel, psychology, and traditions? Will it leave a mark that will echo through the ages, or will it be a footnote?

I have chosen to look at a universal aspect of every human society, death, disease, and funeral rights. I want to thank my husband, brother and sister who have endured my morbid curiosity for such a long time; they also helped me with the thesis.

I want to thank my advisor at NTNU, David Bregaint, without your helpful guidance and encouragement this project would never have been done.

Finally, I need to thank my wonderful grandmothers; even though I can’t be with you at this time. Not a day has passed by without me thinking of you.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, John, 2015. The Fault in Our Stars. Electronic Book: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

## Topic

Without the external force of the Black Death or a similar event, it has been argued that European civilisation, with the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Scientific Revolution, would have been delayed by decades, if not centuries. The plague influenced demographics, economics, societal structures and almost every other aspect of life. All in all, this pandemic touched almost every part of late medieval Europe; naturally, this included the people.

I wanted to look closer at the cultural impact the plague had on the people of the medieval world, given the magnitude of the pandemic and the reoccurrence of the plague.

I had to narrow my field down considerably. Therefore, I chose to focus my thesis on the religious beliefs, and burial practises of the western medieval Church because the Catholic Church was the most significant cultural influence of the period. It was the widespread unifying and universal structure on the continent; its tasks were deeply ingrained in the beliefs surrounding death, dying, and the afterlife, but what effects did the Black Death have on the medieval Church? It has been argued that the powerlessness of the clergy when facing the disease was a significant factor in its future development and decline in the later centuries.

I wanted to look at the Black Death by factoring in the cultural aspect of the plague as a disease that killed suddenly, indiscriminately, and with a cultural context that had a complicated view of sickness and “Devine punishment”.

What impact, if any, did the plague have on medieval beliefs and burial traditions? How did the outbreak in 1347 impact the medieval thinking of death and dying?

I hypothesised that the trauma of the Black Death (1347-1352) fundamentally changed how Europeans perceived and handled death, dying, and memorials.

Wondering if it became more important to be remembered as an individual when so many people died of the plague?

## Has Anyone Asked This Question Before?

When I first started my research on the cultural consequences of the Black Death and then decided that I would choose to focus on burial and break continuation, there were many researchers that had looked into the issue of what had happened.

I studied Chon's work relatively late in my research. Even though many other historians had references to him, they did not often specify that there was a significant difference between the first and second waves of the outbreak. Most focused on the development of art, the decline in the clergy and the evolution and spread of vernacular language as consequences of the plague. Most that referenced Chon also correctly stated that the number and specificity of testaments increased after the plague. However, there is a marked increase between the first and second wave of the pandemic. The historical reason behind these numbers can be, as so much in this topic, debated.

## Status in the Research Field

The historian Joseph Byrne summed up the study of the Black Death when he stated, "*There will never be a last word on the Black Death unless and until it has been forgotten.*"<sup>2</sup> The topic and importance of the Black Death has received much attention from historians and other scholars. Nonetheless, the conclusions and importance designated to the Plague varied drastically through the decades.

During the late 19-century, historians of the time believed that the Black Death led to the transformation of Europe and western civilisation. With the collapse of serfdom and feudalism, this viewpoint shifted in the early to mid-20-century when the historical thinking was that the Plague changed Europe very little. It was believed that even though the black death did impact the late Middle Ages, its effects were not long-lasting.

In recent scholarship, the pendulum has swung again. The Plague has been granted more space and significance in medieval scholarship. David Herlihy concluded that Western civilisation would not have reached its post-plague heights without this outside force in his work "*The Black Death and the transformation of the west*" (1997).

Samuel Chon studied the spiritual effects of the black death by looking at art and wills in Italy and how they changed after the advent of the Plague. His study found that wills became more particular and preoccupied with *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press Page 128.

<sup>3</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. "*The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy.*" London: The John Hopkins University Press.

The Plague had, according to Chon, a defined and provable impact on the psychological makeup of the European population in that the individual became more central in art and grave monuments. Chon's conclusion deviated somewhat from the earlier view of the art historian Millard Meiss whose ground-breaking work from 1951 concluded that the art style for the late Middle Ages changed because the horror of the Plague made the people more religious. That post-plague art was made to "*magnify the realm of the divined while reducing that of the human.*" Unlike Chon, who came later that individual was given more space in art, he did not believe that this was the case.

The art historian Van Ost builds upon Meiss's conclusion, nevertheless, Van Ost's thesis is based on the demographic changes that followed the Plague and the loss of many skilled artists and artisans.

The art historian Judith Steinhoff agrees with Van Ost but adds that the change in style can also be attributed to the survivors change in taste.<sup>4</sup>

Today most of the historians working in the field hold some consensus that the Black Death changed European society in many fundamental ways and that it might have acted as a catalyst for other important events later in the century. Nevertheless, this subject is in perpetual motion, and there are many avenues left to be explored.

## Plan of Action and Sources

I can divide my plan of action into four central portions.

- **One.** Acquire general knowledge of the late medieval period.
- **Two.** Acquire knowledge of historical disease in general and the Black Death in particular.
- **Three.** Acquire knowledge of Christian theology and burial practices of medieval Europe.
- **Four.** Are there any data points showing changes or cultural shifts that the Black Death can reasonably explain?

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To get an overview of the period, I started with the work of Armstrong.<sup>5</sup> She is a well-regarded historian specialising in the period and uses many of the sources by other scholars. I

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<sup>4</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press Page 100.

<sup>5</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2013 "*The Medieval World*" Electronic Book: The Great Courses.

also used the works of Bartlett,<sup>6</sup> Daileader,<sup>7</sup> Ruiz,<sup>8</sup> Wickham<sup>9</sup> and Tuchman<sup>10</sup> to enhance my understanding of the late medieval world. Then I started to look at “the study historical of disease” and the Black Death in particular. Aberth,<sup>11</sup> Byrne,<sup>12</sup> and Cohn<sup>13</sup> were the dominating figures. Other historians featured in this section are the works of Gottfried,<sup>14</sup> Benedictow,<sup>15</sup> Moseng,<sup>16</sup> Herlihy,<sup>17</sup> Horrox.<sup>18</sup> It was important to me to get a biologist's view on the disease; therefore, I read Clark's<sup>19</sup> work, which clarified many aspects of infectious diseases.

Then came the most daunting portion of the research, as I am not a part of a theological community, and my knowledge of this time of Christianity was somewhat limited. I chose to include the works of both believers and non-believers; however, it was more important to me that the scholar was well regarded in their fields than their personal faiths.

I chose to use the new international version of the Bible because there were no contextual reasons not to do this by the end of the project. Though this section, more than any other, has had many influences that cross over from the other scholars, there exists more in the reference

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Armstrong, Dorsey. 2019. “*Medieval Myths & Mysteries*”: Electronic Book: Audible Original. Armstrong, Dorsey. 2013 “*Turning Points in Medieval History*” Electronic Book: The Great Courses.

<sup>6</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. 2013 “*The Development of European Civilization*” Electronic Book. The Great Courses.

Bartlett, Kenneth R. 2013 “*The Italian Renaissance*” The Great Courses. Electronic Book.

<sup>7</sup> Daileader, Philip. 2013 “*The Late Middle Ages*” The Great Courses. Electronic Book.

<sup>8</sup> Ruiz, Teofilo. 2013. “*Medieval Europe: Crisis and Renewal*” The Great Courses, Medieval History. Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company.

<sup>9</sup> Wickham, Chris. 2017. “*Medieval Europe*” Narrated by Derek Perkins. Electronic Book: Blackstone Audio.

<sup>10</sup> Tuchman, Barbara W. 2006 “*A Distant Mirror, The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*” Narrated by: Wanda McCaddon. Electronic Book: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

<sup>11</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. “*From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*”: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge.

Aberth, John. 2005. “*The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350 A brief history with documents.*” New York: Bedford /St. Martin's.

Aberth, John. 2016. “*Plagues in world history*”: Second edition. USA: Rowman and Littlefield.

<sup>12</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. “*Encyclopedia of the Black Death*” Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. “*Daily Life during the Black Death*” Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press.

Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. “*The Black Death*”. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press.

<sup>13</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. “*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*” United Kingdom: Oxford University press.

Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. “*The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*”. London: The John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Gottfried. Robert, S. 1985. “*The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*” New York: The Free Press.

<sup>15</sup> Benedictow, Ole. J. 2006. “*The Black Death 1346-1353 The Complete History*” The Boydell Press. Great Britain Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire.

<sup>16</sup> Moseng, Ole Georg. 2020. «*Pesten kommer - svartedauden og verdens pestepidemier*» Elektronisk bok. Kagge.

<sup>17</sup> Herlihy, David. Editor, Cohn, Samuel H, Jr. 1997. “*The Black Death and the Transformation of the West.*” 1st Edition. Harvard University Press. Electronic Book.

<sup>18</sup> Horrox, Rosemary 1994 Translated and edited. “*Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death*” UK: Manchester University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Clark, David P. 2011. “*Germs, Genes, & Civilization: How Epidemics Shaped Who We Are Today*” Narrated by Summer McStravick. Electronic Book: Pearson.



list. Influential figures in this section were Binski,<sup>20</sup> Madigan,<sup>21</sup> Cook,<sup>22</sup> Ehrman,<sup>23</sup> Bellitto,<sup>24</sup> Le Goff,<sup>25</sup> Aries,<sup>26</sup> and Koester.<sup>27</sup> To get to a conclusion, I looked at the collected data to see if there had been a cultural shift in the wake of the plague.

There was little evidence of a change in burial practice from the archaeological evidence gathered from *the Oxford Handbook of Archaeology*. However, some interesting data collected by Cohn's study of the six Renaissance cities surprised me, as I had hypothesised that there would be a cultural change after the outbreak in the 1340s. However, from his data, it seemed that there was a change that had occurred after the outbreak in the 1360s. Chon's work is referenced by other historians and seem to have a high credibility, especially when considering that they are collected from the archives of six different cities showing a general trend.

## Premise - The Human Animal

*"History never repeats itself. Man, always does."* Voltaire.

The first premise I had to lay out for my thesis to work is that the human-animal is fundamentally the same now as it was 700 years ago; biologically, that is obvious, but also psychologically, we have the same needs as our ancestors.

We are social animals that not only shape our surroundings but, consequently, these constructions shape us. It is the main focus of social psychology and social anthropology. I cannot go into detail about the workings in these fields, suffice to say that human beings run

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<sup>20</sup> Binski, Paul. 1996 "Medieval death Ritual and Representation" London: British Museum Press.

<sup>21</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "Medieval Christianity a New History" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio.

<sup>22</sup> Cook, William R. 2013 "The Catholic Church: A History" The Great Courses. Electronic Book.

Cook, William R. and Herzman, Ronald B. 2013 "Dante's Divine Comedy" Electronic Book: The Great Courses.

<sup>23</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. 2008. "God's Problem, The Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer." Narrated by: L. J. Ganzer. Unabridged Audiobook. Electronic Book: HarperAudio.

Ehrman, Bart D. 2010. Heaven and Hell, A History of the Afterlife. Narrated by John Bedford Lloyd, Electronic Book: Simon & Schuster Audio.

<sup>24</sup> Bellitto, Christopher M. 2018 "The History of the Catholic Church: Tradition and Innovation" Electronic Book: Learn25.

<sup>25</sup> Le Goff, Jacques. 1984. Translated. Goldhammer, Arthur. "The Birth of Purgatory" Cambridge: Scolar Press.

<sup>26</sup> Aries. Philippe. 2008 "The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years" Translator Weaver, Helen 2 edition: Electronic Book: Vintage.

Aries. Philippe. 1975 "Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present" 6 editions: Electronic Book. Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Koester, Craig R. 2013 "The Apocalypse: Controversies and Meaning in Western History" Electronic Book. The Great Courses.

on primary emotions (sadness, happiness, fear...etcetera)<sup>28</sup> they are hard-wired into us, but the expression of these emotions are culturally based; that are communicated through traditions, rituals, and other social structures.

For my purposes, it is essential to remember that funeral rites serve an important societal and psychological function, making the disruption of these rituals and the consequences of this historically interesting.

Secondly, that the people in my sources were rational actors in the context of their own environment. This is especially important when it comes to rituals and beliefs regarding death and dying; the people of medieval Europe had a theological perspective that I do not possess. My sources lived their lives with a Christian understanding of the world. To better understand this point of view, I had to research the Christian beliefs that led up to the period and the influences this had on the western medieval world. I must always have it in the back of my mind, especially if something deviates from the Christian pattern.

Thirdly, I must acknowledge that my sources only represent a small part of medieval society and come with severe limitations if taken to represent the population as a whole. The reason for this is that most of my sources are collected from written materials. The percentage of the medieval population that was able to read and write was exceedingly small and did not represent a broad spectre of the general public. Reading and writing were skills usually reserved for the elites of medieval civilisation, consisting of the nobles, clergy, and some wealthy merchants. These people were able to leave behind a written account of their experiences during the plague years. But the experience of the wider community is often left undocumented and silent; nevertheless, I will try to have them represented in the way of the physical evidence left behind. However, my research will be coloured by the sources I work with. Although I will be able to track developments of funeral rights and rituals, know that this development was often documented and explained through the viewpoints of the medieval elite.

Fourthly, medieval sources often use numbers symbolically, making procuring accurate data from the written reports tricky. When a source writes that there were twelve Genoise plague ships, they might be telling a factual account, or they might be using the symbolism inherent in the number. The same logic held when accounting for the death tolls,

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<sup>28</sup> Aronson, Elliot. Wilson, Timothy, D. Akert, Robert M. 2013. 8 editions. New international edition. *Social psychology*. PEARSON EDUCATION LIMITED. Page 94.

where the number seven is repeated. The symbolic usage of numbers makes attaining actual numbers difficult.

The census data of the period is distorted as well, not because they used symbolic language, but because only the heads of households were counted in the records, making a precise estimate of the death toll impossible when women and children were not accounted for. We cannot know precisely how many people lived under one roof. However, many historians and demographers have come up with estimates.

## Limitations

Reading and writings were prerogatives of the two upper classes of the three estates model. They did not usually preoccupy themselves with the concerns of the general public and therefore their picture of events will undoubtedly be coloured by their position in society. When I write my thesis, I will focus on religious consequences, but if I would be hard pressed to find a point of view that was not heavily coloured by religion because of the societal structure. A problem with this period is that only a tiny minority produced the written sources, as most of the people were illiterate—and the people who were writing were from the two upper classes and usually men.

I tried to compensate for this by finding common ground between the silent and the vocal sources; they were all human; therefore, they had human needs; what were they? Can I see some of them in the sources? Were there some areas where the illiterate got voices or expressed themselves? Art, folklore, testaments, and burials. What does the evidence show?

This plague is one of the most infamous incidences of infectious disease on the European continent, so finding high-quality information on this outbreak was not a significant problem. I will try to limit my thesis to the first two outbreaks of plague and their consequences, as a focus on the first outbreak alone will in my opinion only be able to account for momentary response, not the lasting consequences of the pandemic.

I cross-referenced the impact other pandemics have had on human society and behaviour. This type of comparative narrative; were often available from the same authors, Aberth's *Plagues in world history* being an example. Remembering that although human societies often show trends in developments, they are unique in their own individuality.

I also peeked into the fields of social psychology and anthropology to see if they might lend me some insight into human behaviour under stress. The reason for this is that my thesis's focus is on cultural consequences, and I, therefore, must have a scientific understanding of how disease impacts culture over time.

I needed to know what impact the outbreak had on religious beliefs and practices, as the Church had “failed” in its stated mission of guiding humanity.

Death is an essential part of Christian belief. Jesus rising from the dead, and eternal life being your reward for living a good Christian life, so what happened to a society where death struck indiscriminately, and it seemed like God had decided to punish all of humanity.

Cultural consequences were dominated by Cohn, Binski, Gottfried, Armstrong, Byrne and Aberth. Cohn’s comparative studies in Italy were insightful and helped me reach my conclusion about the plague’s long-term consequences; by providing data on testimonials in the period after the plague. I also had to consider the Italian Renaissance and its possible influence on the cultural changes.

The difficulty in distinguishing one historical disease from another lies in the nature of disease as a biological entity that evolves over time, therefore its symptoms may change becoming more or less severe, or it might burn itself out entirely, leaving us with no biological data for comparison. The history of medical recordkeeping also poses a challenge for historians as contemporaries often were not as interested in diagnosing one disease over another. Given that the cure was often the same. For a medieval or early modern recordkeeper it mattered little if the infectious disease that was ravaging your community was smallpox or tuberculosis, the treatment was the same, quarantine and bloodletting.

Historians theorised for centuries about the true cause of the calamity. And as I pointed out earlier there are still some questions surrounding the topic.

For the people that lived through the Black Death of the 1340s it is important to remember that they did not know why they were dying, nor did they know how the disease spread. But they had theories based on their own observations.

## Conclusion

What I found was more intriguing than I first imagined.

It was not the first outbreak of the Black Death that fundamentally changed medieval Europe.

It was the second, or rather the recurrence of Plague, that changed it.

Humans are remarkably resilient, but the reoccurrence of the plague created a prolonged crisis, crippling society's ability to re-establish the status quo. Therefore, it was not the first outbreak of the plague that changed European beliefs and memorialisation, but the second of the 1360s and the subsequent outbreaks. There was no going back to the ways of pre-plague Europe, especially since plague never really left the continent until the early modern period.

For a more indebt conclusion and summation se page 90.

## Chapter 2: The Great Mortality

*"Oh, happy posterity who will not experience such abysmal woe- and who will look upon our testimony as fable."*<sup>29</sup>- Petrarch

The Black Death is an umbrella term for the pandemic outbreak of Bubonic Plague that struck Europe, the Near-East and North Africa from 1347 to 1352.<sup>30</sup> Its contemporaries did not use the term; they called it the Great Mortality, the great die-off, pestilence, epidemia, blue sickness etcetera.<sup>31</sup> I have chosen to use the term Black Death, as my own contemporaries commonly use it; because it is an accepted term in the modern scientific community.<sup>32</sup> The description of the period as black does not refer to the colour of the buboes that occurred on its victims, but to the social and psychological darkness of the period.<sup>33</sup>

Even though the Plague outbreak from 1347-1352 was the most severe, the pestilence would continue to reoccur for over 350 years, leaving a significant mark on European history and culture.

### What Caused the Plague?

Which disease caused the Black Death has been debated from the Middle Ages up to modern times. In broad terms there are three ways of thinking when it comes to what caused the Black Death.<sup>34</sup>

- One, the Black Death was caused by bubonic plague.
- Two, the Black Death was caused by some other disease.
- Three, the Black Death was caused by bubonic plague plus something else.

The reason for this uncertainty lies in the nature of studying historical diseases. Some do not leave any physical evidence; others were barely described in the sources; and if they were, the type of record keeping makes it hard for modern historians to distinguish one infectious disease from another. Diseases evolve over time, making a positive identification without any

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<sup>29</sup> Horrox, Rosemary. 1994. Translated and edited. *Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death*. UK: Manchester University Press. Page. Xiii.

<sup>30</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 1.

<sup>32</sup> The term did not reach its universality until 1832 when the German physician J.F.K Heckler named his popular essay *Der Schwarze Tod* (The black death).

<sup>33</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Chapter 1. Part 09:00

<sup>34</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 15.

physical evidence nye-impossible. Diseases may also burn themselves out, leaving us with no modern examples for comparison. This chapter will detail the leading scientific theory regarding which disease caused the phenomenon known as the Black Death, bubonic plague. However, there is compelling evidence that bubonic plague, may not have been the only disease ravaging the continent during the late Middle Ages.<sup>35</sup>

Other diseases that have been suggested as a candidate for the Black Death include, Smallpox, Tuberculosis, Anthrax, diseases from space,<sup>36</sup> other Zoonotic infections, and an unidentified haemorrhagic fever.<sup>37</sup> I cannot go into every theory of what disease may have caused the Black Death, but it is essential to point out that there are different competing and complementary theories regarding the question of what caused the plague.

I find the idea that multiple infectious diseases might have been striking the continent simultaneously highly plausible; especially after the discovery of the genetic link CCR5-delta 32, and the timeline for this mutation, around 700 years ago.<sup>38</sup> This evidence has left me in the bubonic plague plus something else camp.

The CCR5-delta 32 mutation grants some immunity to the viral infection HIV1.<sup>39</sup> It is linked to the genetic pressures of the plague years and exists to a higher-than-expected degree in the population of European descent.<sup>40</sup> HIV is a viral infection, so there is no apparent reason for a genetic advantage to have this mutation when the population is under pressure from a bacterial infection; nevertheless, many historical cases show unexpected links between infectious diseases and mutations in the human genome.<sup>41</sup>

Biology is a field that can tell us much about diseases of the past, by looking at modern DNA we can get a picture of what types of genetic pressure the earlier populations were under. The potential in this paralleled field is great, particularly when it comes to the collection of raw data, combined with arkeological findings and historical documentation.

In relation to the Black Death the evidence is compelling, but by no means conclusive. The CCR5-delta 32 mutation merits more investigation, as are the findings of the epidemiologist Graham Twigg, who suggested that the plague was spread by Anthrax spores,

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<sup>35</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 15.

<sup>36</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 53.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 2.

<sup>38</sup> Cohn, Jr, S.K. and Weaver, L.T. 2006. The Black Death and AIDS: CCR5-Δ32 in genetics and history. *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, Volume 99, Issue 8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcl076> (18.02.22)

<sup>39</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 28.

<sup>40</sup> Cohn, Jr, S.K. and Weaver, L.T. 2006. The Black Death and AIDS: CCR5-Δ32 in genetics and history. *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine*, Volume 99, Issue 8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcl076> (18.02.22)

<sup>41</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 28.

<sup>42</sup> found in some plague cemeteries.<sup>43</sup> However, I have yet to come across any credible sources that claim there was no outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe during the 1300s;<sup>44</sup> it is more of a scepticism to the theory that plague was the only disease that had taken hold on the continent and the mechanisms for its distribution. The scepticism has merit, however, the existence of one disease does not exclude the existence of another.

David Herlihy and Samuel Chon are some of the more significant sceptics to the theory that bubonic plague was the only disease causing The Black Death.<sup>45</sup> One of the leading criticisms to the bubonic plague theory lies in its distribution and circulation; we know it is typically spread through rat fleas making direct contact between rats and humans needed for it to spread. The University of Oslo suggested that plague might have also been spread through human ectoparasites,<sup>46</sup> which would answer the question of how the plague was distributed so fast and far on the continent even during the winter months.<sup>47</sup>

For my part, I find the idea of multiple diseases plausible; given the demographic situation in Europe before the plague, the many different reports of symptoms, the diverse medical manifestations, and the genetic evidence; it is believable to me that Europe was hit with several deadly diseases at the same time during the 1300s, one of them being plague.

However, for my thesis, it is not necessary to prove this theory one way or another; if it was one or multiple diseases, only to recognise that there is some debate surrounding the question of the causation of the Black Death. I will therefore continue my thesis in the belief that the main culprit of the Black Death was the disease we have the most evidence for, which is undoubtedly, bubonic plague, but I will by no means exclude the possibility that other diseases were at play during the same period.

If the Black Death was caused by a pandemic outbreak of bubonic plague alone. Or if epidemic outbreaks of other contagious illnesses accompanied the plague during the same

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<sup>42</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 42.

<sup>43</sup> Antoine, Daniel. 2008. *5 The Archaeology of "Plague"* Medical history. Supplement, (27), 101–114. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2632866/> (21.09.22)

<sup>44</sup> Some scholars claim that specific areas were infected by another diseases than plague.

<sup>45</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 49.

<sup>46</sup> Dean, Katharine R. and Krauer, Fabienne and Walløe, Lars and Lingjærde Ole Christian and Bramanti, Barbara and Stenseth, Nils Chr and Schmida, Boris V. 2018. *Human ectoparasites and the spread of plague in Europe during the Second Pandemic*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Volume 115. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29339508/> (18.04.22)

<sup>47</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 50.



period, the consequences for the people living through it was the same; severe, disruptive, and deadly.

## The Plague

The Black Death killed approximately forty to sixty per cent of the entire Medieval world.<sup>48</sup> Most of the deaths in Europe happened in five years, from 1347 to 1352. To put that into a modern perspective, the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918, killed less than three per cent of the world's population, even though it killed more individuals.<sup>49</sup>

The Black Death wiped out entire villages and towns, leaving large parts of Europe depopulated for generations; forests retook the land, domesticated animals roamed freely,<sup>50</sup> churches stood without leaders and churchyards were filled to well over bursting. The Great Mortality was a catastrophe on an apocalyptic scale, changing the face of Europe permanently. It was not, however, the first outbreak of bubonic plague on the continent, that has been set to the plague of Justinian in the 6th century,<sup>51</sup> named after the Byzantine Emperor of the time, who caught the disease and survived.<sup>52</sup> It had significant consequences of its own; hindering the reconquest of the Western part of the Roman empire by the Eastern.<sup>53</sup>

Still, the Black Death of the 1300s was a pandemic on a scale not previously experienced in European history; that we know of. The population would continue to drop after the outbreak, mostly due to subsequent episodes of plague,<sup>54</sup> it is estimated that Europe was struck by eighteen major plague outbreaks between 1353 and 1500.<sup>55</sup>

Demographically it was the most significant event in medieval and early modern history; the European population would not reach its pre-plague heights until the 16- and in some places 1700s.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 94.

<sup>49</sup> Centre for disease control and prevention. 2019. "1918 Pandemic (H1N1 virus)" <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html> (29.04.22)

<sup>50</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC. Page 13.

<sup>51</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 22.

<sup>52</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 38.

<sup>53</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 4.

<sup>54</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*" Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 94.

<sup>55</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2004. *The Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 9.

<sup>56</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 218.

## Yersinia Pestis

The bacterium causing bubonic plague was identified in 1894 almost simultaneously by two students. The first worked for Robert Koch, named Shibasaburo Kitasato. The other worked for Louis Pasteur; Alexandre Yersin.<sup>57</sup> The discovery was made when they studied a post-industrial outbreak of bubonic plague in China's Canton province.<sup>58</sup> Meaning it took over 500 years from the outbreak of the second pandemic in Europe before we could name the most likely culprit behind the deaths of half the population of Europe and the world.

The credit for the discovery and the name of the bacterium was given to Yersin, as his description was deemed to be more accurate, even though Kitasato was the first of the two to describe it. The bacteria were named *Yersinia Pestis* in Yersin's honour.<sup>59</sup> The *Yersinia pestis* bacteria is endemic to most parts of the modern world, excluding Oceania.<sup>60</sup> It is thought to have first occurred in the central Asian steppe lands and is naturally found in the digestive tract of the *X. Cheopis* flea. The flea feeds on different mammalian hosts for nourishment, preferably a rodent; guinea pigs, gerbils, and the black rat.<sup>61</sup> If a flea feeds on a plague-infected rodent, it will contract the bacteria that uses the unique features of its alimentary system and digestive tract to spread to a new host. This way of infection from animal to human makes the plague a Zoonotic disease.

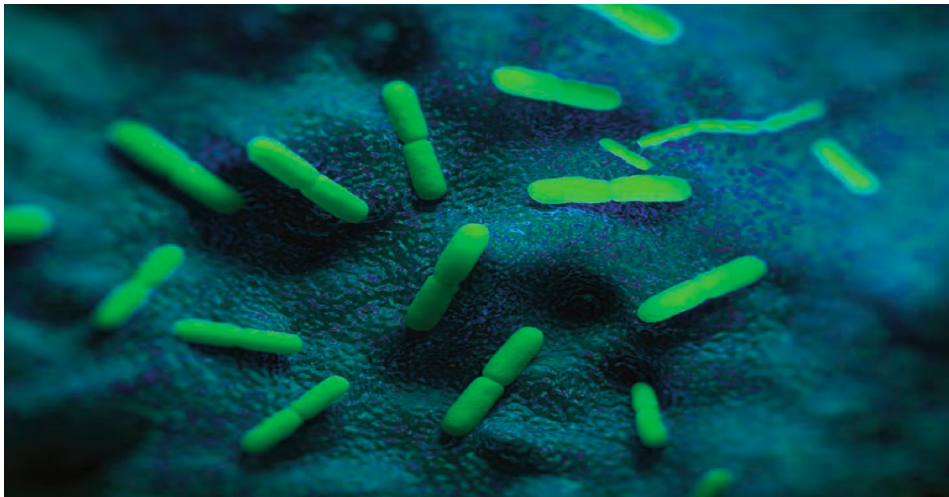


Image: *Yersinia Pestis* Bacteria.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., Page 23.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Page 23.

<sup>60</sup> World Health Organization. 2017. "Plague" <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> (10.03.21)

<sup>61</sup> Trivedi, Janki .2003. "Xenopsylla cheopis" Animal Diversity Web. [https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Xenopsylla\\_cheopis/](https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Xenopsylla_cheopis/) (18.03.2022)

<sup>62</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 26.

An infected flea becomes infective because they do not only possess a stomach and a ventriculus, but also a proventriculus that regulates the amount of blood absorbed by the stomach.<sup>63</sup> The *Yersinia pestis* bacteria creates a blockage in the proventriculus, hindering the food from reaching the stomach; as a result, the flea becomes ravenously hungry, increasing the number and frequency of bites inflicted on the host. When this aggressive behaviour does not result in more food being available for the flea, it regurgitates the blockage created by the bacteria directly into its victim's bloodstream, passing the infection from one host to another.<sup>64</sup>

When the pool of preferable hosts succumbs to the deadly disease, the fleas will seek other options; this did not only include humans. Primary sources report of pigs and dogs becoming sick during the 1340s outbreak<sup>65</sup> and modern sources support this observation.<sup>66</sup>

When *Yersinia pestis* was identified as the cause of the Black Death it was criticised by modern scholars, because of its reliance on direct contact between humans and animals, but *Yersinia Pestis* can be divided into three different forms. The three forms are called, Bubonic, Pneumonic and Septicaemic. They all share some characteristics; sudden-onset fever, weakness, chills, head and body aches, nausea, and vomiting.<sup>67</sup> The main difference between them lies in the method of infection; where in the body the infection takes hold will greatly determine the victim's chance of survival.

The information on *Yersinia Pestis* is mainly based on modern observations of the plague bacterium. As bacteria is a living organism, it evolves, resulting in different strains with different levels of virulence and lethality. It was theorised that the bacterial strain of *Yersinia Pestis* that reached Europe in the 1300s was a particularly deadly and contagious version of the disease. Studies comparing the DNA of modern strains and strains found at historical gravesites do not support this.<sup>68</sup> These epidemiological studies concluded that the *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria has evolved very little over the centuries. But it has changed enough that we can trace the different pathways of infection by studying the DNA evidence found at

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<sup>63</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 31.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., Page 32.

<sup>65</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC. Page 13.

<sup>66</sup> Centre for disease control and prevention. 2019. "Ecology and Transmission"

<https://www.cdc.gov/plague/transmission/index.html> (18.04.22)

<sup>67</sup> World Health Organization. 2017. "Plague" <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> (10.03.21)

<sup>68</sup> Zimble, Daniel L. Schroeder, Jay A. Eddy, Justine L and Lathem, Wyndham W. 2015 "Early emergence of *Yersinia pestis* as a severe respiratory pathogen." *Nature communications*, 6, 7487: <https://www.nature.com/articles/ncomms8487#citeas> (18.04.22)

grave sites.<sup>69</sup> Showing how the continent was infected at different times by different strains of the bacteria crashing into each other, but it does not support the theory that the 1340s strain of plague was particularly deadly.

If the high mortality rate of the Black Death in the 1340s was not caused by an extremely lethal strain of *Yersinia Pestis*, it must be explained by other factors such as societal structures, population density, and climatic changes. The normal strain of the *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria is still lethal in all its forms. Without timely intervention and antibiotics, a modern case of *Yersinia Pestis* has a mortality rate of 60 to 90 per cent,<sup>70</sup> similar rates can be speculated to have been the case for the 1340s outbreak.

## Bubonic

The first and most common form of the Black Death is bubonic; it is this form that gives the disease its name, Bubonic Plague.<sup>71</sup>

It is characterised by the appearance of large swellings, called Buboes around the lymph-nodes, typically with the bigger ones in the neck, groin, and armpit. Its survival rate is estimated to be around 18 per cent which is the highest of the three.<sup>72</sup>

This form of the plague comes as a result of direct contamination from an infected flea bite and is not commonly contagious between humans; exceptions can happen if bacteria from a victim's bubo comes into contact with another human's bloodstream, say if a doctor would neglect to wash their instruments between patients,<sup>73</sup> but that would be atypical for the spread of this form.

The most common way of contracting this form of the plague was that the sufferer lived or worked in close proximity to rats or other flea carrying animals, who would then die; when their primary host has died, the fleas would migrate over to a human, spreading the disease. People that worked with trade goods and the poor, were particularly exposed to this form.

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<sup>69</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 12.

<sup>70</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages* Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 83.

<sup>71</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 50.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., Page 24.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., Page 24.

It was this form of the disease that cause the most amount of scepticism amongst plague scholars, when it became known that the Black Death was caused by *Yersinia Pestis*, because of the requirement of direct contact with rats and their fleas.

There was also no historical report of an epizootic event in the medieval sources, i.e a great die-off of rats, and there was no corelation between European weather patterns and the plague, something that would be expected if the plague was zoonotic and required animal to human contact to spread.



<sup>74</sup> Picture: Lanslevillard, Savoie, France, chapel to Saint Sebastian. 1450-1480.

However, the University of Oslo have expanded on the rat flea theory, suggesting that the human body flea and body lice might have spread the plague directly from one human to another.<sup>75</sup> This would allow the bacteria to spread without going through the rodent population, explaining how the bubonic form of the plague spread so far and fast, despite the variations in climate and living conditions on the continent. There have also been shown a

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<sup>74</sup> [https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae\\_ID=43307](https://inpress.lib.uiowa.edu/feminae/DetailsPage.aspx?Feminae_ID=43307) (19.02.21) PICTURE

<sup>75</sup> Dean, Katharine R. Krauer, Fabienne. Walløe, Lars. Lingjærde, Ole Christian. Bramanti, Barbara. Stenseth, Nils Chr. Schmid, Boris V. 2018. "Human ectoparasites and the spread of plague in Europe during the Second Pandemic" Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29339508/> (19.02.21)

correlation between plague outbreaks and the breeding seasons for gerbils in Asia, supporting the theory that the disease was bubonic plague.<sup>76</sup>

The victims of the bubonic form of plague would be in an enormous amount of pain for days or weeks. Even if the nodes were lanced to relieve the pressure of the infection, the risk of subsequent contamination and death was high. Death would come from toxic shock, and survivors often suffered permanent scarring on the skin. This form of the plague is described by Boccaccio in his introduction to the Decameron 1349-1351.<sup>77</sup>

*"Its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as gavocciolo. From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly gavocciolo would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the gavocciolo had been earlier and as indeed it still was."*<sup>78</sup> - Boccaccio

## Pneumonic

The second most common form of plague was pneumonic. The bacteria have spread to the lungs, causing a severe respiratory infection; after a couple of days, the victim drowns in their own bodily fluids. The survival rate of this form without modern treatment is less than one per cent.<sup>79</sup>

There are generally two ways a person can contract the pneumonic form of the plague, either the infection spreads from existing buboes in the body; meaning that the victim already had the first form of the plague, or they contracted the disease directly from another individual with the pneumonic form; through inhaled droplets. It is the most contagious form of the plague, as it was easily transmitted from person to person through coughing.

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<sup>76</sup> Schmid, Boris V. Büntgen, W. Ulf Easterday, Ryan. Ginzler, Christian. Walløe, Lars. Bramanti, Barbara and Stenseth, Nils Chr. 2015 "Climate-driven introduction of the Black Death and successive plague reintroductions into Europe" The University of Oslo. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1412887112> (04.05.22)

<sup>77</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* A brief history with documents. New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 31.

<sup>78</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* A brief history with documents. New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 31.

<sup>79</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 36.

People trying to combat the epidemic and treat the sick frequently died from the pneumonic form; doctors, priests, and close family members were especially vulnerable as the ventilation in the sick rooms was poor. In the later outbreaks, plague-doctors would gain some protection by wearing plague masks and protective cloaks.<sup>80</sup> Though this was not available for the frontline workers of the first wave.

Louis Sanctus describes this form of the plague in his letters of April 27, 1348, written from Avignon.

*“Indeed, dissections were carried out by doctors in many Italian cities and also in Avignon by order and command of the pope, so that the origin of this plague might be known. And many dead bodies were cut up and opened, and it was found that all who die so suddenly have an infection of the lungs and spit up blood. And thus, it follows that this plague is indeed most terrible and dangerous to all, namely that it is contagious, because whenever one infected person dies, all who see him during his illness, or visit him, or have dealings with him in any way, or carry him to his grave, straightaway follow him, without any remedy.”*<sup>81</sup> - Louis Sanctus

If a person caught the pneumonic form, death would usually occur in a couple of days.<sup>82</sup> Still, it is only the second-fastest way to die from the plague.

## Septicaemic

The third and least common form of the plague is Septicaemic, where the bacteria has entered and infected the bloodstream and therefore has access to the entire body. Death from this form could occur after 24 hours of the first symptom showing and is like the pneumonic form of the plague,<sup>83</sup> fatal in the overwhelming majority of cases.

When the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria enters the bloodstream, it can cause DIC, which is an acronym for Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation,<sup>84</sup> in layman's terms, tiny blood clots. The clots travel through the body, clogging arteries and hindering blood flow, resulting in Localised Ischemic Necrosis, otherwise known as Sepsis. The parts of the body that are deprived of oxygen die. The extremities are particularly vulnerable due to the narrowness of the blood-vessels.

Another blood-related symptom will occur as the disease progresses through the body; the blood will lose its ability to clot, resulting in blood seeping into the internal organs and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Page 35.

<sup>81</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* A brief history with documents. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's. Page 33.

<sup>82</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 36.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., Page 37.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., Page 36.

skin. This condition would leave visible marks on the skin (petechiae)<sup>85</sup>; these skin markings have been theorised to be the mark of the plague,<sup>86</sup> as the blood in the skin creates small pimple-like spots all over the body. In the last stage of septicæmic plague, the victim will start to vomit up blood.<sup>87</sup>

Like the pneumonic form, this can occur when the infection spreads from an infected lymph node; however, it could also happen due to un-sterilised medical tools being used on multiple plague victims.



Picture of modern cases of plague: A Bubonic plague shown by swelling in the lymph nodes in the neck. B Septicæmic plague, blood is seeping into the skin. C gangrene has set-in in the digits during the recovery phase of patient B.<sup>88</sup>

The septicæmic form of the plague is described by the Egyptian scholar and historian Ahmad Ibn Ali Al-Maqrizi 1364-1442, who lived and worked more than half a century after the first wave of the plague. It is theorised that he worked with older sources that are lost to us.<sup>89</sup>

*“In January 1349, there appeared new symptoms that consisted of spitting up blood. The disease caused one to experience an internal fever; followed by an uncontrollable desire to vomit; then one spat up blood and died. The inhabitants of a house were stricken one after the other; and in one night or two, the dwelling became deserted. Each individual lived with this fixed idea that he was going to die in this way. He prepared for himself a*

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<sup>85</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 84.

<sup>86</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 37.

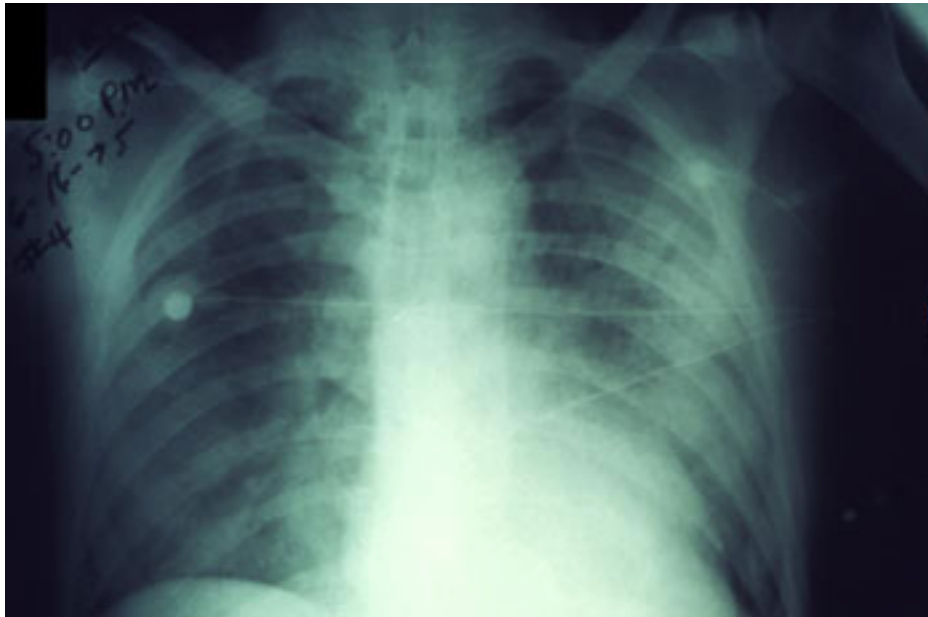
<sup>87</sup> Ibid., Page 27.

<sup>88</sup> Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. UPMC Center for Health Security. 2014 “Yersinia Pestis (Plague)” <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/publications/plague-fact-sheet> (22.09.21).

<sup>89</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350 A brief history with documents*. New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 84



*good death by distributing alms; he arranged for scenes of reconciliation and his acts of devotion multiplied...*<sup>90</sup> – Ahmad Ibn Ali Al-Maqrizi



Picture of a modern case of pneumonic plague; the disease has spread to both lungs.<sup>91</sup>

In modern cases, all three forms may occur. The bubonic form is still the most common, often happening when a human comes into direct contact with an infected animal from an endemic area. The only continent where plague is not found in animal populations is Oceania.<sup>92</sup> Today the WHO keeps a close watch on every area where bubonic plague is known to be endemic. The disease still killed 584 people between 2010 and 2015, infecting 3248.<sup>93</sup> The Black Death might be a historical event, but bubonic plague is very much not.

For the population of the medieval world, the Black Death was, in a word, apocalyptic. The historian J.W. Thompson stated that the Black Death killed the “*flower of a generation while leaving the survivors psychologically traumatised and in a moral crisis.*”<sup>94</sup> A point supported by the medievalist Yves Rounoard.<sup>95</sup> I agree with their sentiment that the trauma of this event was horrific and historically significant; I would add to the narrative by looking to

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<sup>90</sup>Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* A brief history with documents. New York: Bedford /St. Martin’s. Page 84

<sup>91</sup> Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. 2014. “*Yersinia Pestis (Plague)*” UPMC Center for Health Security. <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/publications/plague-fact-sheet> (22.09.21).

<sup>92</sup> World Health Organization. 2017. “Plague” <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> (10.03.21)

<sup>93</sup> World Health Organization. 2017. “Plague” <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/plague> (10.03.21)

<sup>94</sup> Gottfried. Robert, S. 1985. *The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*.. New York: The Free Press. Page. Xiv.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Page Xiv.

Robert S, Gottfried's argument that it was not only the outbreak of the first wave of plague in 1347 but the subsequent waves of plague that promoted the long-term changes in Europe.<sup>96</sup>

The Black Death, though devastating, might have changed Europe in the short term had it not been for the circumstance that the plague kept coming back every decade or so,<sup>97</sup> decimating the population again and again; fundamentally transforming Europe forever.

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<sup>96</sup> Gottfried, Robert, S. 1985. *The Black Death, Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*. New York: The Free Press. Page. Xvi.

<sup>97</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 214.

## Chapter 3. Europe in the 1300s

To establish a break in a pattern of behaviour, you first need a baseline to compare too. Since I am studying a societal shift spanning over one hundred years of history, my baseline needs to determine what was normal for this society.

In the late Middle Ages, Europe was a very different place than the one that exists today; I find Dorsey Armstrong's shorthand for describing the period quite beneficial. She calls it Agrarian, Feudal, and Christian.<sup>98</sup> Not every place was the same, and not every part of Europe will fit this model perfectly, but in general, I agree with her assessment. Europe in the 1300s was to a large extent Agrarian, Feudal, and Christian.

### Agrarian

Subsistence farming was the dominant way of life for most Europeans in the 14th-century, relying in large part on the open field system; 90 per cent of the population worked, lived, or were closely affiliated with agriculture. The remaining 10 per cent can roughly be divided into two equal spheres, those who prayed; the clergy and those who fought; the aristocracy.<sup>99</sup>

This dynamic creates a problem for historians since most of the written material from this period was created by the upper classes of the society, who often did not write about the average citizens' daily life. This is one reason why it is so crucial for historians to supplement their material with non-written sources from other fields of study; archaeology, biology, art history, linguistics, and climatology provides excellent resources for a historian to flesh out the account. One must always keep in mind the inevitable diversity when a category of society becomes as large as the medieval third estate; enveloping everyone from bakers and tanners to, fishers, farmers, and merchants.

### The Little Ice Age

One such field that provides a crucial insight into the late medieval period is climatology, the study of climate and how it changes over time.

Medieval Europe experienced significant changes in its weather patterns in the early years of the 14th century. After a period of warmer climate, later dubbed the Little Climatic Optimum or the Medieval Warming Period Ca. 900–1300. The average temperature shifted, becoming

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<sup>98</sup>Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 5.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., Page 13.

wetter and colder; heavy rain all but cut the harvests by a third to one half during the years 1315 and 1316.<sup>100</sup> This change to a colder climate has been called the Little Ice Age by later climatologists.<sup>101</sup> For the people of the period it was known as the Great Famine.

Before this shift, the population of Europe almost doubled between 1000 and 1300,<sup>102</sup> from approximately 75 million to 150 million.<sup>103</sup> This has led to the speculation that the plague came as a result of a Malthusian crisis (*the demand for resources outstripping the available supply*).<sup>104</sup> I do not support this theory uncritically; if the Black Death and the Great Famine came as a result of the population doubling, why did disease not arrive sooner?<sup>105</sup> Nonetheless, the increased population and pressure for resources, forced farmers to use lands that were not as suited for farming as the area already under cultivation and it would undoubtedly have put pressure on the population before the shift in climate. When that shift happened and the harvests failed, the consequences were more severe because of the size of the populace.

I also note that the clearing of unused lands could have exposed the European population to foreign pathogens, for example anthrax spores from long dead animals buried outside farmland,<sup>106</sup> or they could have been at risk of infection from other diseases due to the increase in the population, that would naturally have led to more people and therefore more opportunity for the spread of infectious diseases.

It is not one factor alone that made the population of late medieval Europe susceptible to disease, as the biologist David P. Clark stated, epidemics are not random acts of God.<sup>107</sup> The same sentiment holds true for the medieval world, were the interaction of multiple factors, subsistence farming, war, weather, and a high population, all played roles in the coming devastation.

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<sup>100</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 10.

<sup>101</sup> Rafferty, J. P. and Jackson, Stephen T. 2016. "Little Ice Age." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Little-Ice-Age>. (25.02.2021)

<sup>102</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2013. *The Medieval World*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Audio. (14:17:00)

<sup>103</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 7.

<sup>104</sup> MacRae, D. Gunn. 2021. "Thomas Malthus." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Malthus>. (16.03.2021)

<sup>105</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 14.

<sup>106</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague." Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 51.

<sup>107</sup> Clark, David P. 2011. *Germs, Genes, & Civilization: How Epidemics Shaped Who We Are Today*. Narrated by Summer McStravick. Electronic Book: Pearson. Audio. Chapter 1. (08:00)

## The Great Famine

For a society consisting of 90 per cent subsistence farmers, any kind of climatic shift could be disastrous. Farmers in the early 1300s faced the difficult choice; sow your seed grain now and face immediate starvation, but retain the possibility of a future harvest, or eat your seed grains; postponing starvation but face a future where you have nothing to grow the next season.<sup>108</sup>

It has been estimated that the continent saw a 10 per cent population decline during the great famine.<sup>109</sup> This sounds very dramatic to modern ears, but as any demographer will tell you, a 10 per cent population loss is recoverable in a surprisingly short time. What is more insidious is the long-lasting consequences on the surviving population.

It is surprisingly hard to starve to death. Modern observations of people suffering from the eating disorder Anorexia Nervosa and the controversial Minnesota starvation experiment (1944-45) show the effects of starvation on the human body.<sup>110</sup> The sufferer/ participants experience height- and weight loss, unusual hair growth, infertility, frailness, changes in pallor, obsessive thinking patterns surrounding food, depression, and lethargy. People who die from starvation alone, die as a result of organ failure,<sup>111</sup> but this is not the normal way a person who is starving dies. In situations where the person is starving due to famine, death usually occurs because of starvation related complications and illnesses,<sup>112</sup> way before they expire due to organ failure.

Since the human-animal has not changed substantially since the Middle Ages, these symptoms would also have been prevalent in the population during the Great Famine. Eating spoiled food, being exposed to foreign microorganisms, and the effects of a weakened immune system due to prolonged malnutrition all contributed to an increase in the overall mortality rates of the period before the advent of the plague.<sup>113</sup> This weakened state of the

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<sup>108</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*. Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 10.

<sup>109</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*. Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 17.

<sup>110</sup> Baker, David and Keramidis, Natacha. 2013. "The psychology of hunger" *Monitor on Psychology*, 44(9). <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2013/10/hunger> (22.09.2021)

<sup>111</sup> Spaulding-Barclay, Michael A., Jessica Stern and Philip S. Mehler. 2016. Cardiac changes in anorexia nervosa. *Cardiology in the Young* 26, Nr. 4: 623–628. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cardiology-in-the-young/article/cardiac-changes-in-anorexia-nervosa/7BE512B4F0203019EF6EFC304F82C55B> (22.09.2021)

<sup>112</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*. Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 18.

<sup>113</sup> Clark, David P. 2011. *Germs, Genes, & Civilization: How Epidemics Shaped Who We Are Today*. Narrated by Summer McStravick. Electronic Book: Pearson. Audio. Chapter 3. (30:00)

population could help to explain the high mortality rates of the first wave of the pandemic in the 1340s.

Human remains from the time testify that the people who survived the great famine did not do so unscathed.<sup>114</sup> A large section of the population would have possessed compromised immune systems and stunted growth from childhood, leaving them vulnerable to later infections.<sup>115</sup>

The consequences of the great famine of 1315-1317 would have been less relevant had it occurred earlier in the period. Though tragic and unpleasant for the people living through them, famines are not a rare historical phenomenon. The population loss was manageable on a demographic scale and would have been overcome in a relatively short timeframe. But, on the eve of a highly infectious and deadly pandemic, the consequences of the famine were catastrophic.

Archaeologists studying the remains of 490 victims of the Black Death from a mass grave in London's East Smithfield cemetery found that skeletons bearing the signs of malnutrition had a 50 % higher chance of dying of the plague than the remains that did not share the same signs, from the same excavation site.<sup>116117</sup>



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Skeletons excavated from the East Smithfield burial ground.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Dewitte, S. N., & Hughes-Morey, G. (2012). "Stature and frailty during the Black Death: the effect of stature on risks of epidemic mortality in London, A.D. 1348-1350." *Journal of archaeological science*, 39(5) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jas.2012.01.019> (25.02.2021)

<sup>115</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 30.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., Page 44.

<sup>117</sup> DeWitte, Sharon N. and Wood, James W. Edited by Wachter, Kenneth W. (2008) "Selectivity of Black Death mortality with respect to preexisting health" <https://www.pnas.org/content/105/5/1436> (25.02.2021)

<sup>118</sup> Museum of London, "Excavation of East Smithfield in 2011," *Medieval London*, <https://medievallondon.ace.fordham.edu/items/show/161>. (24.02.2022)

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., (24.02.2022)

It is well established that people who suffer from malnutrition are more vulnerable to disease, but if we were to extrapolate the finds from East Smithfield and apply them as a rule for the Black Death. That would make an already deadly disease significantly more fatal. Since the majority of the European population of the time consisted of subsistent farming, it is not a stretch to speculate that most of them were touched by the Great Famine of 1315-1317 and its consequences, both the direct and indirect.

A higher per centage of mortality amongst the poorer aspects of society is by no means a medieval phenomenon, but it is notable that the parts of the population that felt the famine the most, also felt the effects of the plague the most, at least when it comes to actual mortality rates.

When 90 per cent of the population consisted of people that did not leave much evidence of their experiences in the written record, the historian must look at the more affluent aspects of society for their sources. It is time to look at the societal structure of Medieval Europe.

## Feudal

Medieval society was feudal in that it was fundamentally hierarchical. This structure developed during the Early Middle Ages out of the roman, Patron-Client relationship,<sup>120</sup> and was grounded on the practice of exchanging military fidelity and services for landholdings and the concessions these lands produced.<sup>121</sup>

According to this political system, power and loyalty was based on the personal ties between a lord and his vassal. The ruling head on top; the king or emperor, was owed loyalty by his vassals, the dukes, counts, bishops, barons; who again had their own vassals; from armed knights to skilled laborers, peasants, and serfs. Everyone had a sett place in this order.

This hierarchy had an economic aspect in the manorial system where the peasants and serfs owed their landowners labour in exchange for access to the lands and protection against violence.<sup>122</sup> In the period before the plague there were signs that the Feudal and Manorial systems were changing, this was mainly due to the rapid population growth, the increased

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<sup>120</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) "*The Development of European Civilization*" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Chapter 2. (00:39:00)

<sup>121</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Page.140.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., Page 140.

influence of larger cities and towns, and the growing power accumulation and centralisation of some heads of state.<sup>123</sup>

It is important to note how hierarchical this system was; the king was the ruling head of the nation, his high nobility ruled under him, under them there was lesser nobles all intertwined with other bureaucrats often recruited or representing the clergy. All in all, it was a top-down bureaucracy, frequently based on personal and familial ties.

Medieval society was fundamentally hierarchical. The clergy had a hierarchy, “Secular” society had a hierarchy. Heaven and Hell had a hierarchy. Even the body and the soul had a hierarchy. When studying medieval society, this structure is everywhere and you could not escape your place in the system or if you could, it is not necessarily seen as a good thing in the sources.

For the people on the lower end of this system, serf or no, your life as a medieval peasant was a harsh and little appreciated one. From our high society sources “peasant” is a derogatory term.<sup>124</sup>

The difference if free peasant and unfree serf is more of a legal difference than it is a practical one, if you were not bound to the land by law, you were bound to it by tradition and custom.<sup>125</sup> The reality of most medieval peasants was that you either worked together with your community, or you died alone. Your world revolved round the village and at its centre was the church.

The church controlled how the population understood the wider world, something as seemingly secular as timekeeping was under the mandate of the church. The year frequently began with Easter. The liturgical calendar was superimposed over an older one, centred around the growing season. Paralleling Christ’s rise from the grave and life’s triumph over death with the cyclical nature of spring and the rebirth of plants and animals.<sup>126</sup> When to harvest, when to sow, when too fast and when to feast, all these types of questions linking practical matters of farming life to religious signs and symbols, shows how ingrained religion was in the medieval daily life. There can be no separation of church, state, and daily life in the medieval world as we have come to understand this separation today.

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<sup>123</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Page. 141.

<sup>124</sup> Ruiz, Teofilo. 2013. *Medieval Europe: Crisis and Renewal*. The Great Courses: Medieval History. The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 8.

<sup>125</sup> Ruiz, Teofilo. 2013. *Medieval Europe: Crisis and Renewal*. The Great Courses: Medieval History. The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 6.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, Audio (00:50:38)



It was widely believed that for society as a whole to prosper, one had to play their assigned part in the hierarchy of the world.

## The Three Estates Model

In Medieval society the population was also hierarchically segmented into an arranged order, known as the three estates model. Those who worked, those who prayed, and those who fought. It was an idealist division of societal responsibility and labour, and it was generally not mobile.

- **The first estate:** Those who fought; the nobility, kept the peace and protected the people from violence and harm. They had theoretically a monopoly on violence.
- **The second estate:** Those who prayed, consisting of the clergy; it was their responsibility to guide the immortal souls of Europe towards eternal salvation; they were consequently also responsible for burials and death rites.
- **The third estate:** Those who worked provided food, labour, and all other necessary services that kept society running. Consequently, this was the biggest and most diverse of the three estates, comprising everyone that did not fall into the first two categories.

This way of thinking about societal division of labourer is illustrated in Geoffrey Chaucer's Piers Ploughman.

*“By Saint Paul!” quoth Perkin · ‘ye proffer so fairly  
That I’ll swink and sweat · and sow for us both  
And other labours do for thy love · all my lifetime,  
In covenant that thou keep · Holy Church and myself  
From wasters and wicked men · that this world destroy.  
And go and hunt hardily · for hares and for foxes,  
For boars and for badgers · that break down mine hedges;  
And go train thy falcons · wildfowl to kill,  
For such come to my croft · and crop off my wheat.”<sup>127</sup>*

An explanation of the poem Piers Ploughman:

An overeager knight wants to help a farmer by doing some manual work but is chastised, because if the knight does his job of protecting the farmer and his fields from attacks, the farmer will plough and sow the fields for them both; ergo, if you stick to your job; I will stick to mine, and then we shall both prosper in the end. Chaucer is explaining the ideal of the stationary society and the three estates model. The three estates model idealises an immobile

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<sup>127</sup> Langland, William. (1957) “The Book Concerning Piers the Plowman” “Piers Plowman, Passus VI” Translated by Attwater, Donald and Attwater, Rachel. ed. Attwater, Rachel. Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website. London and New York. (1957) <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/piers-plowman-passus-vi> (17.02.21)

world structure. It was believed that this division of responsibility was for the greater good. After all, even heaven had a strictly hierarchical structure. **(source)**

There was no concept of individual rights or individual freedom. Your rights and obligation were decided by your membership in a larger world order essentially outside your control.<sup>128</sup> However, as in every ideal- or model of society, there was always people and groups that did not fit into the model.

Even before the advent of the Black Death and the societal changes resulting from the drastic decrease in population, the three estates model's ideal of a fixed world order was challenged by the growing cities with its burgeoning merchant class and their steadfast refusal to stay in their lain.

## The Cities and the Merchants

After the fall of the western part of the Roman empire in 476, the cities in the west experienced a sharp decline, both in size and population. It was not until the late 1200s that we can trace a real uptake in the numbers of Europeans and substantial growth in the cities, this was primarily due to the warming temperatures dubbed the little climatic optimum,<sup>129</sup> where a prolonged period of good weather led to bigger harvests and a generally improved diet. We can see population growth and evidence of a land-crunch in the late 1200s, where more and more rugged land was used for farming, indicating that all other farmland was occupied.<sup>130</sup> The growth of the population affected the cities and the people residing in them. With more people, the demand for goods and services increased, something that benefited the merchant classes who brought in the goods.

The rise of the merchant class was a difficult conundrum for the medieval three estates model; they were by default part of the third estate; those who worked, but through their trading, they often amended fortunes that could rival lesser nobles. By dressing and acting in manners meant to imitate the courts of the nobility, they were sometimes mistaken for members of the aristocracy; apparently this problem was such that it was thought necessary to create sumptuary laws, restricting the types of clothing non-nobility was allowed to wear.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ruiz, Teofilo. 2013. *Medieval Europe: Crisis and Renewal*. The Great Courses: Medieval History. The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Audio. 00:41:28

<sup>129</sup> Rafferty, J. P. (2014) "medieval warm period." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/science/medieval-warm-period>. (18.04.22)

<sup>130</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 7.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., Page 368.

The establishment of trade networks in the early- and high Middle Ages played a significant role in spreading the pandemic to Europe in the 1300s, as the infection would travel through these networks to the cities and towns on the continent.<sup>132</sup> From these cities the disease would spread inland following the roads and rivers in a pattern we recognise today. The historian David Herlihy commented that the plague, swept across Europe from the east in a clockwise motion, tightening around the medieval world like a noose.<sup>133</sup> When the dust had settled and the bodies were buried, the merchant classes would come out of this pandemic with more power than ever before; with more money on fewer hands there was more demand for their imported luxury goods, than for the everyday commodities that were produced on the continent.<sup>134</sup>

## Christianity

After the East-West Schism of 1054, the western section of medieval Christianity was under the authority of the Pope in Rome, the eastern parts being under the control of the Patriarch of Constantinople. There were some significant theological differences between the two branches in the late medieval period. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify that I will refer to Western Christian practice when I discuss Christian traditions unless otherwise specified.

In the Middle Ages, there was no clear division between church and state; this often led to conflict between the ruling heads of Europe and the papacy because of the hierarchical nature of the society. Who had ultimate authority over the other; was it the Pope, or was it the King, or the Holy Roman Emperor? Even with this authority conflict, Christianity was the continent's universal unifying structure; it was a compulsory part of society, much like our modern state. It collected taxes, had a justice system, a common language, and a large bureaucracy.<sup>135</sup>

For most medieval Europeans going to church was a daily activity. Christianity followed your passage through life, from the cradle to the grave. This description can be taken remarkably literally since the church controlled the marking of time and the calendar. The tolling of bells called monks and nuns in for prayer; divided the day for the community

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<sup>132</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 59.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., Page 1.

<sup>134</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) "*The Development of European Civilization*" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 15.

<sup>135</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. *Medieval Christianity A New History*. Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 1 (02:00)

surrounding an abbey or chapel.<sup>136</sup> Church festivals and feast days marked the passing of the seasons. Moreover, many important announcements were made upon the church steps and important marriages took place outside the chapel doors.

There was very little descent. As a consequence, the landscape of Medieval Europe bore the marks of the Church everywhere.<sup>137</sup> Church buildings towered over the landscape; the Church was the most prominent landowner in the period. The language that was used as a lingua franca for the learned and the Church was Latin. Most educational institutions were raised with Christian backing, and the Church was intimately involved in political matters and trade.<sup>138</sup>

It is really hard to understate how important faith and the Church was for the medieval man and woman. I will not comment on anyone individuals' personal faith. Nevertheless, as a social institution and cultural influence, the argument is strong for it being the most significant cultural influence of the period. It was the lens the people of the time understood the world they lived in. As a creation of an all-seeing, all-powerful God represented on earth by his Holy Church. The centre of this Church had historically been located in the eternal city of Rome. Cradle of the Roman empire, linked to the Church's very foundation through the saints' Peter and Paul.

In 1347, the pope and his entire court were not located in Rome; they had moved the papal see to the French city of Avignon. This posed both a political and theological challenge for the Christians of the 1300s.<sup>139</sup>

## The Avignon Papacy

The Avignon papacy, later dubbed the Babylonian captivity, was a period lasting from 1309 to 1378.<sup>140</sup> The Pope and the Curia moved their permanent residence out of the city of Rome in Italy to Avignon in France. This move was primarily due to a political conflict between Pope Boniface VIII and the French king, Philip IV; known as the fair, and the unstable political situation created by this struggle. The most contested question was one of hierarchy,

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<sup>136</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 13.

<sup>137</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. *Medieval Christianity A New History*. Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 1 (04:00)

<sup>138</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 13.

<sup>139</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. *Medieval Christianity a New History*. Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 29 (18:00)

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., Chapter 29 (18:30)

economics, and power. Who had the ultimate authority to tax and judge the French subjects, the pope, or the king?

Pope Boniface declared that the church had universal supremacy in a papal bull *Unam sanctum*<sup>141</sup> and had drawn up plans to excommunicate the king of France when Philip's men attacked him at Anagni on September 7, 1303.<sup>142</sup> Even though the pope was only held in custody for two days, he died the following month of supposed shock. And it was a shocking event.

Philip the Fair justified his actions by declaring that Pope Boniface VIII was a heretic. He played on anticlerical propaganda from earlier in the conflict, as both men had tried to discredit each other for years before the incident at Anagni. He put pressure on the next Popes, Benedict XI, and Clement V to pursue this narrative and posthumously persecuted Boniface VIII for his alleged crimes until 1311.<sup>143</sup> Even in death, Boniface could not escape the wrath of Philip.

In 1309, under this king's watchful eye, the new, Gascon-born Pope Clement V decided to move the Holy See to the southern coast of France. Avignon was bought by a later Pope Clement VI, from Queen Joanna of Provence.<sup>144</sup> However, the location was suspiciously close to the French king's influence, but that was not the only reason for the move.

The political situation in Italy and the city of Rome was unstable, even dangerous, and Avignon provided increased security for the Pope. The city also had economic advantages. It is a port city and has easy access to the Rhone River making communication north of the Alps easier. The river and the city's harbour offered access to the Italian trade routes providing the city a geographic advantage over Rome; despite the many contemporary complaints of the mistral wind,<sup>145</sup> that forced the large papal bureaucracy to work inside by candlelight, even during the daylight hours. Avignon still outcompeted the holy city by providing security, monetary advantages, and access to the courts in the north; an essential characteristic during the hundred years war (1337-1453) between England and France.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Brown, E. A.R. (2022) "Philip IV." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-IV-king-of-France>. (17.03.21)

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., (17.03.21)

<sup>143</sup> Brown, E. A.R. (2022) "Philip IV." Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-IV-king-of-France>. (17.03.21)

<sup>144</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 141.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., Page 136.

<sup>146</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 44.

It is not surprising that the Italians did not like this change: <sup>147</sup> Petrarch describes the city as "a sewer where all the muck of the universe collects." <sup>148</sup>the city became known for its decadence and none of the Avignon popes were known for their piety;<sup>149</sup> Dorsey Armstrong commented that during the plague years there were eleven brothels in Avignon while Rome only had two. <sup>150</sup> This might be more of a reflection of the situation, that the more influential and wealthier parts of the clergy and their accompanying households moved with the pope to France, not a difference in piety. If the more affluent clients are moving, a financially minded prostitute might decide to move with them, than to stay in a declining city.

And the Holy city did decline. Most of the income of the city of Rome came as a result of pilgrims and the papal bureaucracy. When the pope moved the Holy See to Avignon, he moved one of Rome's most essential financial pillars out of the city. For the residents of Rome, this was disastrous. <sup>151</sup> Still, it would become a blessing in disguise during the plague years, as the falling population and the drop in visitors would provide some protection from the disease. <sup>152</sup>

Though the move of the papacy to Avignon was primarily motivated by the political realities of the time, the consequences of the move were severely damaging for the institution of the one true Catholic Church. The popes had always travelled and held court outside the Holy city; however, it now seemed that the successor of St Peter had left his seat in Rome permanently. Financially this was a problem but also theologically.

St Peter is directly tied to the geographical location of Rome through his martyrdom on the spot where the modern St. Peter's Basilica stands today. <sup>153</sup> His name Peter was given to him by Christ, meaning rock, his original name was Simon. <sup>154</sup> The famous bible quote Matthew 16:18 states "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." <sup>155</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> I use the term Italians as an indication of geographical identity, not national identity.

<sup>148</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2019 "Avignon" <https://www.britannica.com/place/Avignon>. (04.05.22)

<sup>149</sup> Bellitto, Christopher M. (2018) "The History of the Catholic Church: Tradition and Innovation" Electronic Book: Learn25. Chapter 15 Part (05:00)

<sup>150</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 137.

<sup>151</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 63.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., Page 84.

<sup>153</sup> Cook, William R. (2013) "The Catholic Church: A History" The Great Courses. Electronic Book. Page 13.

<sup>154</sup> The National Gallery." St Peter Martyr" <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/glossary/st-peter> (04.08.2021)

<sup>155</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2016%3A18&version=NIV> (19.04.22)

Christ was giving Peter the task of building up the institution of the Church on earth against the forces of Hell. Peter's successors were known thus forth as the Bishop of Rome. Even the popes in Avignon still held this title. The theological question became; if your papal jurisdiction is based on being the direct successor of the Bishop of Rome, and you have left Rome, are you still the successor of St. Peter?

For a highly religious society, this was a major source of contention and conflict, and many tried to reconcile the situation, criticizing, and pleading with the pope to relocate back to Rome. Notable examples being, the father of humanism, who coined the term Babylonian captivity, for this situation, Francesco Petrarch, the author of the Decameron, Giovanni Boccaccio, St. Bridget of Sweden, and Catherine of Siena.<sup>156</sup>

## Reform Movements

The dissatisfaction with the state of the Church and its clergy was not new in 1309; it predated the move by over 200 years.<sup>157</sup> During the 1300s one can see anticlericalism in Dante Alighieri's Divine comedy,<sup>158</sup> with sinful clergy being punished in divinely inspired and creative ways. Still, one must remember that the most prominent critics of the church were most often a part of the clergy themselves. We only have to look at the many attempts of reform to see evidence of this.

The most influential of these movements being the different mendicant orders who promoted poverty and humility, as a reaction to the growing power, wealth, and isolation of the church:<sup>159</sup>

Remembering that the Roman Catholic Church is the longest-lasting institution in Europe, it is no wonder that it has seen its fair share of reform and reform movements; nevertheless, there had not been a crisis quite like the Avignon papacy since the fall of the Roman Empire. The bishop of Rome had left the Holy city, seemingly breaking the line of succession of the vicar of Christ. They had moved the papal court and the curia out of Rome leaving the city in a state of decline, even going so far as to removing the papal archives.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Editors of Encyclopaedia. 2019 "Avignon" <https://www.britannica.com/place/Avignon>. (04.05.22)

<sup>157</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Page 14.

<sup>158</sup> Cook, William R. and Herzman, Ronald B. (2013) "Dante's Divine Comedy" Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 29.

<sup>159</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2019) "mendicant." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mendicant-Roman-Catholicism>. (04.08.2021)

<sup>160</sup> Bellitto, Christopher M. (2018) "The History of the Catholic Church: Tradition and Innovation" Electronic Book: Learn25. Chapter 15 (06:40)

Pluralism, absenteeism, nepotism, and simony were widespread in the church even before the move to France; and although this was recognised as problems by the Avignon pope Benedict XII, (1334-1342),<sup>161</sup> and other Avignon popes, no effective measures were taken to deal with the systematic issue, leaving it as a festering wound.

## The Long-Term Impact of the Avignon Papacy

It is unlikely that Clement V intended to move the Holy See permanently to Avignon, but there it would stay through the Great Famine of 1315-22, the start of the Hundred Years War 1337, and the arrival of the Black Death in Western Europe 1347-1352.

Through the lens of the religiously minded, medieval Europeans, the papal exodus from Rome was one possible explanation of why God had decided to punish them so severely by sending down: the horsemen of Famine, War, Plague and Death.<sup>162</sup>

When pope Gregory XI attempted to rectify the situation in 1377 and move the papacy back to Rome, the situation worsened, resulting in the Great Western Schism and several popes vying for power and excommunicating each other as anti-popes.<sup>163</sup>

Because of this fracturing of the church hierarchy, Christopher M Belitto argues that one can date the start of the reformation Church back to the Avignon papacy.<sup>164</sup> I am inclined to agree with his assessment on account of the hierarchical nature of the theological and societal worldview of medieval Europe. When this hierarchy was disrupted, and questions of who was the one true pope could be raised in the public discord for years, what other political and theological questions could be raised? One important caveat is that without the printing press the reform movement, of the 14- and 1500s would not have been able to spread as it did, but one cannot understand the reformation without understanding the impact of the Avignon papacy.

If the papacy had not moved to Avignon in 1309, the history of the Catholic Church would undoubtedly have looked very different to what we have today. It is interesting to observe that during a time when the institution of the church was arguably more substantial than in any other time in history, seeing as it was such a significant part of the everyday Europeans life, it was also weakened in so many ways. During the plague years, it would

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., Chapter 15 Part (08.00)

<sup>162</sup> Koester, Craig R. (2013) "*The Apocalypse: Controversies and Meaning in Western History*" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 34.

<sup>163</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) "*The Development of European Civilization*" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 20.

<sup>164</sup> Bellitto, Christopher M. (2018) "*The History of the Catholic Church: Tradition and Innovation*" Electronic Book: Learn25. Chapter 1 Part (00.22.30)



become weaker still. Weakened or not, in Avignon or Rome, when the plague struck the European population turned to their known comfort of the church's beliefs, rites, and rituals.

## Chapter 4. The Second Estate

To understand what happened to the Church and the clergy during the plague years and why it happened, I need to look closer at the composition of the Church during the high Middle Ages. What problem could this composition create in the Church hierarchy? Moreover, what types of criticism did the clergy face?

### Who Were the Second Estate?

The second estate are defined as “those who pray” in the three estates model. They comprise everyone from the poor parish priest to the pope in Avignon, and everyone in between. I would argue that they were the most influential of all the groups defined in the three estates model, because their reach was so much larger and substantial than the medieval state.

The Catholic Church faced scrutiny by many of its contemporaries, both internal and external, during the 1300s.<sup>165</sup> One of these contemporary critics was King Edward, the Second of England, who supposedly wrote a poem lamenting the situation in the clergy in 1327 after he was deposed by his wife and son in 1326.<sup>166</sup> In the poem, he rails against all the social classes in English society, including the priests that were, according to him, neglecting their holy duties and leaving the churches empty.

*“And when he has gathered marks and pounds,  
He rides out of town with his hawks and hounds  
Into a strange country, and stops with a wench in her bed;  
And it is well for her whom first such a parson catches in the land.  
And thus they serve the chapel, and let the church stand.”<sup>167</sup>*

This was written before the plague, but after the Great famine. It is not difficult to imagine that a deposed king might have some issues with a society that had allowed his downfall, even if it is unlikely that the king himself wrote the poem. I find the concrete criticisms of the Church interesting. The author specifically mentions money, hunting, sex and leaving the Church and chapel standing empty. King Edward / the author is describing a clergy that is neglecting their holy duties and acting like the aristocracy, and they are not

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<sup>165</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. “*Medieval Christianity a New History*” Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 10 Part (25.00)

<sup>166</sup> Valente, Claire. 2002. “*The Lament of Edward II*”: *Religious Lyric, Political Propaganda*: Collected 29.03.22. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.2307/3301327?journalCode=spc>. Page 423.

<sup>167</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*. Second edition. London. Routledge. Page 124.

alone in pointing out the worldly behaviours of the clergy. William Langland, John Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer wrote a diatribe against churchmen during the 1360s, 1370s and 1380s,<sup>168</sup> raising many of the same concerns as the deposed King.

Other dissenting voices had the misfortune of being branded as heretics by the Church. For example, the reformers John Wycliffe<sup>169</sup> and Jan Hus. The former was branded as a heretic posthumously during the council of Constance; the latter was burned at the stake during the same council in 1415; sadly, for Hus, the burning did not take place posthumously.<sup>170</sup>

## Church Orders

Most of the people that directed criticisms towards the Church came from within the clergy itself or had some connection to the Church through the education system. The historian Kevin Madigan discerns that we can trace how the church developed over time by looking to what concerned the people of the church, and what they were writing and complaining about.<sup>171</sup> One of the primary complaints that persisted up to the high Middle Ages was the sin of simony, the buying and selling of church offices. This problem in particular inspired many counters in the many reform movements.<sup>172</sup>

The most remarkable of these movements is the Mendicant orders. Known as the beggar friars;<sup>173</sup> they were members of five monastic orders and lived together in communes, but unlike the secluded living of the Cistercians, the Mendicants ministered amongst the people, often in urban areas, working as teachers, preachers, healers, testamentary witnesses and administrators of the last rights.<sup>174</sup>

During the plague years, they would suffer heavy losses, as they were essentially the frontline workers of the Middle Ages. After the plague their reputation as, good Christians increased as the plague continued to thin their ranks and fill their coffers, because of charitable donations from the laity.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. *From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*. Second edition. London. Routledge. Page 122.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., Page 67.

<sup>170</sup> Bartoš, František M. and Spinka, Matthew. 2021 *The final trial of Jan Hus*: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jan-Hus/The-final-trial> (12.04. 2022)

<sup>171</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. “*Medieval Christianity a New History*” Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 10 Part (26:00)

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., Chapter 10 Part (25:00)

<sup>173</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague.*” Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 292.

<sup>174</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 151.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., Page 151.

The mendicant orders in particular, idolised the early church father's contempt of the Roman practice of preserving one's name and lineage through grave monuments, lavish funeral ceremonies, and profane art<sup>176</sup> *sepulcrorum ambition*; seeing it as an expression of the sins of pride, avarice and other earthly attachments.

Despite the popularity of the Mendicant orders during and after the plague years, their distaste for lavish funeral ceremonies and other ways of preserving one's name would not become popular with the masses, quite the opposite.<sup>177</sup>

## An Evangelising Religion

A noteworthy feature of the medieval Church is that it was international,<sup>178</sup> not that nationalism existed in the way we would define it today. The Church had a mission to spread its message of eternal salvation to the peoples of the world. Stated in Matthew 28:19-20.

*"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."<sup>179</sup>*

As Christianity spread on the continent, we can see its cultural influence in the increasing uniformity of the burial traditions in Europe.<sup>180</sup> However, Christianity had to adapt from a fringe Jewish sect of shepherds to the dominant religion of an expansionist empire, which did not always translate well, even after the fall of Rome. One of the many changes this transformation required was the establishment of the papal bureaucracy and recruitment practices for this bureaucracy.

The historian R. W. Southern stated that the medieval church was unavoidable and compulsory, like our modern state.<sup>181</sup> It collected taxes, was involved in trade and politics, not to mention the massive landholdings. In this, the second estate was like the first, but unlike them, they had an additional task; to convey God's message on earth. Something that could be hard to do when the Church did not live up to its own ideals. It was the perceived failure to live up to its own ideals and its worldliness that the contemporary critics of the church most

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<sup>176</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*. London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page 160.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., Page 160.

<sup>178</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "Medieval Christianity a New History" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 1 Part (01:40)

<sup>179</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+28%3A19-20+&version=NIV> (19.04.22)

<sup>180</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Page 259.

<sup>181</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "Medieval Christianity a New History" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 22 Part 1 Part (01:30)

often lamented in the source material.<sup>182</sup> During the high Middle Ages, the “secular” nature of the church was perceived as a problem.<sup>183</sup>

## Primogeniture

In many ways, the clergy was worldly because it was intimately connected to the aristocracy due to the simple reality that to become a part of the second estate, you often had to be born into the first.<sup>184</sup> This was the norm because of the establishment of the inheritance custom of primogeniture. The practice of primogeniture developed during the early Middle Ages, where the firstborn son would inherit the lands and title of his father, leaving second sons and daughters' lesser inheritance, if any.<sup>185</sup> Primogeniture ensured that lands and titles would not get watered down over the generations, leaving high society with a lot of surplus sons and daughters.<sup>186</sup>

Some of these children could find their place in the first estate as armed knights or with advantageous marriages, but as a part of the first estate, they were not supposed to participate in any paid work; that was part of the third estate and far too low on the societal hierarchy.<sup>187</sup> There was, however, a solution to the surplus sons and daughters that did not have doweries or money to pay for military equipment and training, the clergy.

The men and women of the church were not permitted to marry or produce offspring that could inherit their lands and titles.<sup>188</sup> This meant that they needed to recruit all their members from the other two estates, but it also meant that over time they would never have to divide up landholdings between heirs, leaving the church in a position where they accumulated wealth over time.

Many aristocratic families bestowed their surplus sons and daughters to the Church, regardless of the suitability for a monastic life of the individual. Some took to religious life; others did not.<sup>189</sup> Several monastic houses are described in the sources as dens of iniquity. In

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<sup>182</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. “*Medieval Christianity a New History*” Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 22 Part (25:00)

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., Chapter 22 Part (29:00)

<sup>184</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague.*” Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 17.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., Page 367.

<sup>186</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) “*The Development of European Civilization*” Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Chapter 3. Part (1:20:00)

<sup>187</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague.*” Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 17.

<sup>188</sup> Frazee, Charles A. (1972) “*The Origins of Clerical Celibacy in the Western Church*” *Church History* Vol. 41, No. 2. pp. 149-167. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3164156?seq=10>. Page 158. (05.04.22)

<sup>189</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) “*The Development of European Civilization*” Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Chapter 3. (1:20:00)

the Decameron, Boccaccio tells a pornographic story that takes place in a nunnery.<sup>190</sup> And Boccaccio is not alone; there are several literary examples where contemporaries commented on the sexual immorality of the members of the Church despite the mandated celibacy. For example, Petrarch and Dante.

Some religious orders became so worldly that it was hard to distinguish them from the aristocracy since most families did not want their children to lack anything.<sup>191</sup> A monetary donation often followed the donation of the child to the part of the Church that was associated with their offspring—increasing the churches wealth and inclination to recruit the children of the first estate.

Even though the upper echelons of the clergy often consisted of the offspring of the aristocracy, the lower rungs of the church hierarchy could be no better off than the parishioners they served when it came to material wealth.

The mendicant friars had the foundational virtues of apostolic poverty.<sup>192</sup> Other members of the clergy could be pore because of their station as the priest of an impoverished parish. Though poverty existed in the Church at the lower rungs of the hierarchy, and it was a stated ideal of some monastic orders, wealth and opulence had become a feature of the papal court in Avignon.<sup>193</sup> So much so that it was noted as a problem by the pope.<sup>194</sup>

The challenge of researching the personal faith of people that lived and died 700 years ago ranges from hard to impossible, especially when looking at societal beliefs. However, many church historians note that a considerable amount of high standing churchmen did not choose this career path of their own volition, and although many of them undoubtedly did find their religious calling in the Church, if we are to believe the sources, many did not.

I believe the establishment of primogeniture and its consequences on the recruitment to the second estate, must be taken into consideration when assessing the clergy's reaction during the Black Death, factoring inn that many people of the cloth did not choose this life, and the responsibilities that followed with it.

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<sup>190</sup> Olson, Kristina (2021) “*Books that Matter: The Decameron*” Electronic Book: Audible Originals. (2:07:05)

<sup>191</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) “*The Development of European Civilization*” Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Part (1:14:00)

<sup>192</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. “*Medieval Christianity a New History*” Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 22 Part (25:00)

<sup>193</sup> Bellitto, Christopher M. (2018) “*The History of the Catholic Church: Tradition and Innovation*” Electronic Book: Learn25. Chapter 15 (14:20)

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., Chapter 15 Part. (14:20)

Other than its mandate to spread "the good news" to the world, being an enormous bureaucracy and a solution to the problem of the surplus children created by primogeniture; what exactly were the tasks of the medieval Church?

The Church had the holy obligation of dealing with death, dying, and the deceased of medieval society.

## The Sacred Duty of Dealing with the Dead

Dying in an immobile community has never been a wholly private affair. Every major stationary society must, at a point, deal with its dead on a grand scale if it is going to survive. The living and the dead must be separated. No functioning civilisation can tolerate having its streets littered with the bodies of the dead and dying;<sup>195</sup> therefore, the task of dealing with its dead is too important and too significant to be left alone in the private sphere.

It was the holy duty of the men and women of the clergy to ensure that this process went according to church custom and law.

Medieval Christianity was built upon the back of the Western Roman Empire; when this part of the empire collapsed in 476, the Catholic Church took up many of the responsibilities of the former regime,<sup>196</sup> the least surprising of the tasks the Church took upon itself was the handling of the dead and the dying.

Early Christianity was seen as a religion of healers, where they cared for the welfare of the sick and downdraught, and by showing their fellow men and women compassion and care, they often observed the miracle of divine healing of the sick. This linked the Church's foundations to the importance of caring for the people that are suffering.

Another foundational conviction of the Catholic Church is the belief that Jesus Christ triumphed over death after being dead for three days; through his sacrifice and resurrection, he made it possible for humanity to overcome the original sin brought upon humankind in the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge.<sup>197</sup> However, for a soul to reach paradise, it is paramount that the individual goes through certain rites and rituals during their lifetime. By creating and upholding these rights and rituals, Christianity was a foundational structure that helped build European civilisation after the fall of Rome.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC Page 95.

<sup>196</sup> Cook, William R. (2013) "The Catholic Church: A History" The Great Courses. Electronic Book. Page 26.

<sup>197</sup> Oden, Robert. (2013). "God and Mankind: Comparative Religions". Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 37.

<sup>198</sup> Bartlett, Kenneth R. (2013) "The Development of European Civilization" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 3.

## Religious Rituals

Robert Oden summed up the societal roles of religious rituals in three points.

1. Ritual creates religious people out of ordinary people.
2. Ritual moves people through the various stages of religious life.
3. Ritual reminds people that they belong to this, not another, group of people.<sup>199</sup>

During the Middle Ages, the Church's position was much stronger than it is in various modern communities. Nevertheless, the mission of the Church remains the same. That is, maintaining and creating religious people, moving these people through several stages of their lives, and by doing so, marking them as a part of a larger community. The Church's role as the shepherd of the community's spiritual needs is why it was singled out as a particular estate in the three estates model. Their assigned role as "those who pray" was to ensure that the people and the community did not stray from the path of God, earning his displeasure; it was also a descriptor of what many people in the clergy preoccupied their days with, prayer.

The ultimate end goal for many Christians is to reach heaven after one's death. However, for a soul to reach paradise, it is paramount that the individual goes through predetermined rites and rituals. It was believed that they could not pass through the gates of St. Peter by the merit of good works alone.<sup>200</sup> The Catholic Church defined these as holy acts, rituals that must be performed during one's lifetime. The modern rendition of these holy acts is known as the seven holy sacraments.<sup>201</sup>

## Baptism

The first holy act is Baptism, where you are cleansed of the original sin.<sup>202</sup>

In Dante's *Comedia* (1308–21) unbaptised infants and good men that had never known Christianity were not condemned to eternal punishment in Hell; instead, they were forever stuck in Limbo, with no possibility of reaching paradise.<sup>203</sup> Dante's description of the fate of the unbaptised children in purgatory reflected the common belief that if unbaptised, regardless of their blamelessness, could still not gain entry into the kingdom of Heaven because they had

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<sup>199</sup> Oden, Robert. (2013). "*God and Mankind: Comparative Religions*". Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 43.

<sup>200</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 87.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., Page 87.

<sup>202</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 1 Part 02:00

<sup>203</sup> Cook, William R. and Herzman, Ronald B. (2013) "Dante's Divine Comedy" Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 18.



not gone through the ritual cleansing of the Baptism and were therefore not initiated into the Christian community as a whole. Consequently, this led to the tradition of baptising sickly new-borns immediately upon birth, as their parents would fear for their children if they would depart this world with the taint of original sin.

I emphasise the importance of Baptism due to its function as an entry point into the Christian community. Once you were part of this community in the Middle Ages, it followed you from the cradle to the grave. During an individual's lifetime, you were required to prepare and partake in several rituals and rites, such as communion and confession. However, there was one ritual that was almost as important as the entry into the Christian community, and that was the exiting of it, or at least the mortal part of it.

## From the Realm of the Living to the Realm of the Dead

The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep maintains that rites of passage can generally be described by a three-step model. This model applies for both the living and the dead.<sup>204</sup>

1. Separation
2. Transition
3. Incorporation

These steps are seen in virtually all human death rituals, but van Gennep has found that they are emphasised differently across cultures and over time,<sup>205</sup> depending on the beliefs of the particular culture. For medieval Christians the main focus lies in the transitional stage, where the soul of the living is departing the mortal coil and entering the eternal afterlife. But initially you needed to go through the first stage, separation.

### Separation

To ensure a good death and marking the passage from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, there were some last acts that had to be performed on this earth. These rites were aptly named the last rites. The purpose was to prepare one's soul for the afterlife by the last confession and anointing with oil, but they also serve an important social function on top of their theological one, by making a clear distinction between the living and the dead.

In a world where the belief in the immortality of the soul and the continuation of life after death was universal, it is understandable that the separation and laying to rest of the dead

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<sup>204</sup> Berkson, Mark. 2016. *“Death, Dying, and the Afterlife: Lessons from World Cultures”* Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 44.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., Page 44.

members of the community was essential.<sup>206</sup> If not done right, the dead could potentially linger in the realm of the living.

In the Middle Ages, there existed a cultural anxiety, fuelled by the remnant beliefs of earlier non-Christian traditions, on the nature of the unrestful dead that could communicate with the still living.<sup>207</sup> This concern is seen in art, literature, and folklore. However, it was not only seen in non-Christian tradition.

In the Bible, there are examples where people communicate with the dead. In first Samuel 28:7, King Saul talks to his deceased teacher Samuel through a medium, though God is not pleased with Saul for this behaviour. In Christian theology, the world of the living and the world of the dead are deeply connected, but they are supposed to be separated, hence why God is so displeased with Saul. This connection and the importance of death becomes even more significant, when factoring in the founding belief of Christianity that Jesus triumphed over death after his sacrifice on the cross. However, there is a caveat to the separation of the living and the dead, and that is the cult of saints.

The vital task of separating the world of the dead from the world of the living was allocated to the Church. Under ordinary circumstances, when a Christian was dying in the High Middle Ages, they would go through a sacred process in accordance with a representative of the Church that had the ability to perform these holy rituals, typically a priest.<sup>208</sup> One must recognise that to die was a sacred process, often with some hope for divine healing if God so wished; if not, it was the duty of the priest to safeguard the soul for the afterlife, offering comfort in their time of need and making sure they did not die alone.<sup>209</sup>

The role of rituals is significant in the duration of the Black Death because it marks a period where the second estate could not perform its holy appointed duties as mandated by church doctrine, making the response to this historically interesting.

In the last rites, Christianity's roots as a healing religion are particularly apparent.<sup>210</sup> Early Christian doctrine linked the state of the body directly to the state of the soul. This direct link would be challenged during the plague years due to the massive death toll and indiscriminate way God chose the people who fell ill and died.

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<sup>206</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 1 Part 06:00

<sup>207</sup> Nedkvitne, Arved. 2003. *Møte med døden i norrøn middelalder En mentalitetshistorisk studie*. Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske Forlag. Page 27.

<sup>208</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 32 Part 45:30

<sup>209</sup> Binski, Paul. (1996) "*Medieval death Ritual and Representation*" London: British Museum Press. Page 30.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., Page 30.

## Transformation

The last rites is a bodily and spiritual purification ritual that closely ties the deep-rooted belief regarding the impurity of the body and its need for this cleansing before the individual moves on to the next plane of existence.<sup>211</sup> It starts while the dying individual is still alive, but lying on their deathbed. The body is washed, and a representative of the clergy is summoned, customarily, this was the duty of the parish priest,<sup>212</sup> but exceptions to this were not uncommon, particularly during times of plague when the mortality amongst the priests was high.

*“Certainly, there were many deaths among the parish priest and chaplains who heard confessions and administered the sacrament, and also amongst the parish clerks and those who visited the sick with them.”-Gilles li Muisis of Tornai 1348<sup>213</sup>*

Elements of the mass were incorporated into the last rites, the final confession being of great significance; if you had any sins left that you had not repented for, this was your last chance to beg for forgiveness and die in a state of spiritual grace.

Even though the concept of Purgatory was a part of Catholic doctrine since its introduction during the second council of Lyon in 1274,<sup>214</sup> it still did not nullify the importance of the last confession. As Dante pointed out in his *Comedia*, Purgatory, all though temporary, was a place of severe punishment<sup>215</sup> that one should endeavour to leave behind as soon as possible.

The final and most feared step was the anointing or unction of the dying with oil; this is a permanent transformative act, and you were supposed to be on the brink of death. If you lingered on or survived, you were regarded by the community as a latter-day Lazarus, i.e., a walking corpse.<sup>216</sup> The reason for this is that you had now been transformed and separated out of the community of the living, and you, like the biblical Lazarus belonged to the land of the dead. When the last rites had been performed, and hopefully for the individual sufferer; the actual process of dying was over, the process of incorporating the body and burial could begin.

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<sup>211</sup> Binski. Paul. (1996) *“Medieval death Ritual and Representation”* London: British Museum Press Page 29.

<sup>212</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 119.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 214

<sup>214</sup> Le Goff, Jacques. 1984. Translated. Goldhammer, Arthur. *The Birth of Purgatory*. Cambridge: Scolar Press. Page 84.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 343.

<sup>216</sup> Binski. Paul. (1996) *“Medieval death Ritual and Representation”* London: British Museum Press. Page 29.

## The posthumous rites

During the 1300s, it was customary to toll the church bells upon the death of a member of the community. The bells alerted everyone within hearing distance of the occasion, much in the same way that they called people in for mass or alerted everyone of an emergency. The bells would be chiming again during the funeral rituals. An old belief of the time stated that the bells broke up miasmatic air and held demons at bay.<sup>217</sup>

For normality to be restored in the community after a death, the body of the deceased needed to be properly inaugurated into its eternal resting place. This was done by holding funeral mass, offices, and the final appeasement of the body into the hierarchy of souls.<sup>218</sup> The body was put on display in the home for several days; depending on the weather,<sup>219</sup> so that the family could mourn and have visitors. One of the reasons for this was to make sure that the deceased person was, in fact, dead.<sup>220</sup> In a time before autopsies and internal monitoring, the precise moment of death could be hard to determine, but it was usually said to be the moment when no breath was detectable, as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7. The absence of breath symbolised the absence of the soul.

When it was time, the bell would chime again; the washed body was stripped naked, tied up in a winding-sheet and placed in a coffin or on a bier. The priest or deacon would lead a procession from the residence accompanied by acolytes (candle bearers)<sup>221</sup> and mourners clad in black.<sup>222</sup> Some of the mourners were paid to partake in this display of sorrow. If the deceased was a member of a guild or confraternity, the symbols of the group were often displayed during the procession. Many of these groups had stipulations of proper burials and acts of mourning guaranteed in their memberships.<sup>223</sup> At the Church, the body was placed on a stand before the altar while the priest blessed the body and led the congregation in prayer for the soul of the departed; incenses marked the presence of God and masked the smell.<sup>224</sup> Medieval Christianity stressed the importance of the coming apocalypse, e.g., the last judgement.<sup>225</sup> During the funeral, the priest led the congregation in a prayer for the immortal soul of their compatriot, asking God to be merciful when passing his final ruling. As many

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<sup>217</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC. Page 32.

<sup>218</sup> Binski, Paul. (1996) *“Medieval death Ritual and Representation”* London: British Museum Press. Page 30.

<sup>219</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 82.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 82.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 92.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 93.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 92.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 93.

<sup>225</sup> Koester, Craig R. (2013) *“The Apocalypse: Controversies and Meaning in Western History”* Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 96.

people still do to this day, medieval Christians believe they lived during the end times. One of the most famous funerary prayers of the 1300s is the Dies Irae, it reflects this apocalyptic perspective of the world.

### Awaiting the Apocalypse: The Dies Irae, C. 1250

<i>"Day of wrath, day that</i>	<i>Therefore when the Judge shall sit,</i>
<i>Will dissolve the world into burning coals,</i>	<i>Whatever lay hidden will appear;</i>
<i>As David bore witness with the Sibyll.</i>	<i>Nothing unavenged will remain.</i>
<i>How great a tremor is to be,</i>	<i>My prayers are not worthy,</i>
<i>When the judge is to come</i>	<i>But do Thou, Good (God), der kindly</i>
<i>Briskly shattering every (grave).</i>	<i>Lest I burn in perennial fire.</i>
<i>A trumpet sounding an astonishing sound</i>	<i>Among the sheep offer (me) a place</i>
<i>Through the tombs of the region</i>	<i>And from the goats sequester me,</i>
<i>Drives all (men) before the throne.</i>	<i>Placing (me) at (Thy) right hand.</i>
<i>Death will be stunned and (so) will Nature,</i>	<i>After the accursed have been silenced,</i>
<i>When arises (man) the creature</i>	<i>Give up the bitter flames,</i>
<i>Responding to the One judging.</i>	<i>Call me with the blest.</i>
<i>The written book will be brought forth,</i>	<i>Kneeling and bowed down I pray,</i>
<i>In which all (evidence) is contained</i>	<i>My heart contrite as ashes:</i>
<i>Whence the world is to be judged.</i>	<i>Do Thou, my End, cares for my end."<sup>226</sup></i>

When the service was over, the procession preceded to the place of burial, where a grave was already opened; they placed the body either directly in the ground or put the entire coffin into the grave. There have not been noted any gender disparities in this practice in Europe.<sup>227</sup> Cremation was explicitly forbidden as a method of burial with the exception of persons being

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<sup>226</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 93.

<sup>227</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Page 261.

severely punished, revealing Christianity's early history as a counter to the polytheistic beliefs of the Greco-Romans, who practised cremation for their burials.<sup>228</sup> The final prayers at the site worked to remind the congregation again of the coming resurrection and Jesus's words, "*I am the Resurrection and the Life*".<sup>229</sup> Then the mourners would return to the Church for final prayers. When the church ceremony was over, the congregation could go back to their lives, although, in some communities, it was custom to have funeral feasts after the service.<sup>230</sup>

Even though the three steps of separation, transformation and internment had been performed, that did not mean that the life of the deceased was over, only that it was over on this plain of existence.

## The Earthly Resurrection

Christian doctrine is explicit in that you need your earthly remains on the day of judgment. In the Dies Irae, Nature and Death are stunted, tombs are shattered, and men rise from their graves. This is described in the book of revelation. On that day, man would have to stand before God in their mortal body and be judged for its earthy trespasses and sins.<sup>231</sup> This belief in the earthly resurrection is reflected in the uniformity found when archaeologists studies medieval cemeteries. Thousands of remains have been found in the same position, laid out on their back, arms either crossed on their chest or by their sides, aligned east to west, facing the rising sun.<sup>232</sup> The reason behind this particular direction was the belief that this was the direction God would face you on the last day.

Even during times of tremendous societal pressure like the Black Death, we can find several examples of mass graves adhering to this physical pattern of burials. We do not know if these individuals had the luxury of experiencing a "good death" in that they had the ceremonies and processions performed; however, we can still see that the people who had them buried did so with an amalgamation of respect for communal traditions and Christian beliefs.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford. Oxford University Press Page 261.

<sup>229</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 94.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., Page 94.

<sup>231</sup> Koester, Craig R. (2013) "*The Apocalypse: Controversies and Meaning in Western History*" Electronic Book. The Great Courses. Page 67.

<sup>232</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Page 261.

<sup>233</sup> Museum of London, "Excavation of East Smithfield in 2011," *Medieval London*, <https://medievallondon.ace.fordham.edu/items/show/161>. (24.02.2022)

Nevertheless, we know that the Black Death severely affected traditional funeral customs. The Italian notary Gabriele de'Mussis of Piacenza described the situation as follows-

*"(I)t was often the mother who shrouded her son and placed him in the coffin, or the husband who did the same for his wife, for everybody else refused to touch the dead body. No prayer trumpet or bell summoned friends and neighbours to the funeral, nor was Mass preformed. Degraded and poverty-stricken wretches were paid to carry the great and noble to burial, for the social equals of the dead person dared not attend the funeral for fear of being struck down themselves. Men were borne to burial day and night, since needs must, and with only a short service."*<sup>234</sup>

De'Mussis is not alone in describing the disintegration of funeral customs and norms during the first outbreak. In the introduction to the Decameron, Boccaccio described the collapse of the funeral services in Florence.

*"It had once been customary, as it is again nowadays, for the women relatives and neighbours of a dead man to assemble in his house in order to mourn in the company of the women who had been closes to him; moreover his kinfolk would gather in front of his house along with his neighbours and various other citizens, and there would be a contingent of priest, whose number varied according to the quality of the deceased; his body would be taken thence to the church in which he had wanted to be buried, being borne on the shoulders of his peers amidst the funeral pom of candles and dirges. But as the ferocity of the plague began to mount, this practice all but disappeared entirely and was replaced by different customs. For not only did people die without having many women about them, but a great number departed this life without anyone at all to witness their going. Few indeed were those to whom the lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives were accorded; on the contrary, more often than not bereavement was the signal for laughter and witticism and general jollification- the art of which the women, having for the most part suppressed their feminine concern for the salvation of the souls of the dead, had learned to perfection. Moreover it was rare for the bodies of the dead to be accompanied by more than ten or twelve neighbours to the church, nor were they borne on the shoulders of worthy and honest citizens, but by a kind of gravedigging fraternity, newly come into being and drawn from the lower orders of society. These people assumed the title of sexton, and demanded a fat fee for their services, which consisted in taking up the coffin and hauling it swiftly away, not to the church specified by the dead man in his will, but usually to the nearest at hand. They would be preceded by a group of four or six clerics, who between them carried one or two candles at most, and sometimes none at all. Nor did the priest go to the trouble of pronouncing solemn and lengthy funeral rites, but with the aid of these so-called sextons, they hastily lowered the body into the nearest empty grave they could find. 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 contained, either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their on parts of the city, the 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. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours 'attention to the fact more by the smell or their rotting corpses than by any other means. And with what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there, and everywhere. Whenever people die, their neighbours nearly always followed a single, set routine, prompted as much by their fear of being contaminated by the decaying corpse as by any charitable feeling they may have entertained toward the deceased. Either on their own, or with the assistance of bearers whenever these were to be had, they extracted the bodies of the dead from their houses and left them lying outside their front doors,*

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<sup>234</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 94.

*where anyone going about the streets, especially in the early morning, could have observed countless numbers of them. Funeral biers would then be sent for, upon which the dead were taken away, though there were some who, for lack of biers, were carried off on plain boards. It was by no means rare for more than one of these biers to be seen with two or three bodies upon it at a time; on the contrary, many were seen to contain a husband and wife, two or three brothers and sister, a father and son, or some other pair of close relatives. And times without number it happened that two priests would be on their way to bury someone, holding a cross before them, only to find that bearers carrying three or four additions biers would fall in behind them; so that whereas the priest had thought they had only one burial to attend to, they in fact had six or seven and sometimes more. Even in these circumstances, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was according to dead people than would nowadays be shown toward dead goats. For it was quite apparent that the one thing which, in normal times, no wise man had ever learned to accept with patient resignation (even though it struck so seldom and unobtrusively), had now been brought home to the feeble-minded as well, but the scale of the calamity caused them to regard it with indifference. Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient consecrate ground for them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships 'cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top...'”<sup>235</sup>*

Other sources report the restricting or outright banning of funeral customs during the plague. The tolling of bells,<sup>236</sup> wearing black, lighting candles, displaying the body, funeral masses, processions, and other outwards signs of mourning, were all trimmed down to the bone. However, as Boccaccio noted, people did return to their regular customs after the plague. Unfortunately, the Black Death was not the first, nor would it be the last time the plague struck the continent.

## A Good Death and Testaments

In Christianity, there is a belief in eternal life after death; how pleasant that posthumous existence would turn out to be would-be determent by your mortal time on earth. This belief must never be forgotten when looking at the medieval mindset regarding death, dying, and memorials. To the medieval mind, death was not only an ending but also a beginning; how good this beginning was depended in part on the manner of once passing. Hence it was vital that you prepare yourself for your own death. A good death was a death that was expected and where you had time to die.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350* A brief history with documents. New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 78-79.

<sup>236</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Page 32.

<sup>237</sup> Horrox, Rosemary (1994) Translated and edited. "*Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death*" UK: Manchester University Press. Page 245.



During the late Middle Ages, a part of the good death that increasingly became more popular to safeguard a good transformation was the legal testament. The will helped the dying to protect their future in two ways. Firstly, it ensured that all earthly obligations were handled as specified by the deceased. Rites of inheritance, property and doweries were essential matters that had to be settled, especially if the head of the household should pass unexpectedly.<sup>238</sup> Secondly, the mediaeval testament was a spiritual document whose function was to settle the soul in the afterlife.<sup>239</sup> This was done by stipulating that good works be done in the name of the departed, paying of alms for the poor, donating to holy orders and having masses sponsored in their names were all frequent requests in late medieval testaments.<sup>240</sup>

Testaments were usually dictated to a notary with several witnesses: often with a representative of the second estate present. Copies of the document were registered publicly and given to the testator; the notary also kept his copy.<sup>241</sup> Even though wills were a legal practice inherited from the Romans, they were not generally used unless people were going on extended journeys or were sick. Therefore, they were often dictated from the deathbed.

During the plague, many testaments had revisions because the heirs and heirs apparent had already died of the disease.<sup>242</sup> Historians have often used medieval wills to track the progression of the plague and its social consequences. Samuel Cohn did a landmark comparative study on six cities in Italy where he studied the way plague influenced how people used wills to instruct the living; on the erection of grave monuments and chapels where the deceased wished to be buried, and charitable donations to the Church to hold masses in the name of the deceased and their family members.<sup>243</sup> After the plague, the number of wills and the detail in them increased.<sup>244</sup> For more detail, see chapter 6.

## The Saints and the Hierarchy of Heaven

Praying for the souls of the departed is closely connected to the catholic belief regarding the interplay of the living, the dead and the afterlife. In the Bible, you were not supposed to

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<sup>238</sup> Binski, Paul. (1996) *“Medieval death Ritual and Representation”* London: British Museum Press. Page 33.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., Page 22.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., Page 33.

<sup>241</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Page 359.

<sup>242</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 179.

<sup>243</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*. London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page 160.

<sup>244</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. *“Medieval Christianity a New History”* Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 32 Part (43:00)

contact the dead directly, as demonstrated in 1 Samuel 28, where king Saul earned God's displeasure by contacting his dead teacher. There was a caveat to this rule: praying to the holy Saints. According to church doctrine, the saints had already gained access to Heaven and the court of God; by having attained this position in the hierarchy of Heaven, they could intercede on the behalf of the souls of the living and the dead.<sup>245</sup> Through the intermedium of the holy saints, the living could affect the destiny of the dead going through a cleansing process in Purgatory.<sup>246</sup>

To have someone living intercede and pray to the saints on your behalf was a strategy for a good death and afterlife. We can see this practice in action when testators donated to religious houses for them to hold masses for their souls, and for the souls of their family members in perpetuity.<sup>247</sup> Even to be buried in physical proximity to a saint was a noteworthy strategy for the upper echelons of medieval society; this proximity to the earthly remains of the saints was usually not accessible to laypeople. It was believed that being close to the rising saint would grant some favour on judgment day.<sup>248</sup>

Upon your death, you were supposed to be buried in the parish of your birth.<sup>249</sup> Several early Churches were associated with the burial grounds or earthly remains of local saints. Numerous alters held parts of saints and relics; it was also the place where the Eucharist was consecrated, making it a holy place<sup>250</sup>. It was desirable to be buried as close to the alter as possible; when the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 opened up the possibility for Churches to receive payments for the privilege to be buried within the Church buildings, a booming market developed.<sup>251</sup> People who donated to the Church were buried under the stones, inside the walls or in the vaults; once the flesh had rotted away, the body could be buried at a different location, and the space could be reused.<sup>252</sup> Royalty and esteemed members of the first and second estate might gain the privilege of being buried near the altar of a chapel or a church that housed the remains or partial remains of a saint. Not to mention that some royals were themselves elevated to sainthood during the Middle Ages. Even in

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<sup>245</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. 2010. *Heaven and Hell, A History of the Afterlife*. Narrated by John Bedford Lloyd, Electronic Book: Simon & Schuster Audio. Chapter 14 (06:00)

<sup>246</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part. 2:00

<sup>247</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*. London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page 133.

<sup>248</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. "*Daily Life during the Black Death*" Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 90.

<sup>249</sup> Binski, Paul. 1996 "*Medieval death Ritual and Representation*" London: British Museum Press. Page 55.

<sup>250</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part 09:30

<sup>251</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2006. "*Daily Life during the Black Death*" Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 90.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., Page 90.

death, the fundamental hierarchical nature of the Middle Ages is apparent.<sup>253</sup> The upper classes were also the part of medieval society that could afford the expense to have tombs.

For the less prestigious or wealthy members of the community, their eternal resting place was the churchyard. The churchyard was a plot of land generally located next to the Church or chapel, surrounded by walls. The yard had been blessed by a bishop or priest and was therefore considered sacred.<sup>254</sup> This did not mean that nonsacred practises did not take place at the graveyards; we have examples of laws prohibiting dancing, selling of goods and prostitution. Building on the thinking that there is no real reason to make up laws that prohibit behaviours if they don't take place, it would seem that the line dividing the lives of the living and the dead were tenuous at best. When the churchyard was full, the bones of the deceased parishioners could be dug up and stored in the Church's vaults or charnel house.<sup>255</sup>

In medieval art and literature, there are many depictions of skulls and bones in the graveyard; this was mainly due to the reality that many people were not buried in coffins, it was often used as a way of transporting the body to the place of burial, so when they exhumed the body for future transportation to the vault or charnel house, it did not come out in a single piece.<sup>256</sup> To my modern mind, this breaking up of the body would be considered a problem, since it is stated that you will need your earthly remains on the day of judgment, but it was not considered a problem in the medieval world, because their hierarchical thinking and understanding of the universe extended to their view of the human body.

According to the law, the head was the deciding factor when determining where a body and, therefore, the soul, was understood to have been buried.<sup>257</sup>

People outside the Christian community did not have access to the sacred grounds of the churchyard; lepers, suicides, heretics, Jews, unbaptised infants, and other socially ostracised groups and persons did not have the privilege of being buried here.<sup>258</sup> Under customary circumstances, the duties of conducting the burials fell on the parish that the deceased person belonged to, i.e. The parish they had been born in; however, many cities had public cemeteries that were not committed to a specific parish, but they were often connected to a church house or hospital. Generally, these were used by the clergy and Christian travellers, but during plague, these cemeteries were the first to be dug up to make room for mass grave

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<sup>253</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Page 271.

<sup>254</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *Daily Life during the Black Death* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 91.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 91.

<sup>256</sup> Binski, Paul. 1996 *Medieval death Ritual and Representation* London: British Museum Press. Page 55.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 55.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 55.

pits.<sup>259</sup> During the Black Death, the capacity of these and other cemeteries was thoroughly overloaded.

*“Alas, this mortality devoured such a multitude of both sexes that no one could be found to carry the bodies of the dead to burial, but men and women carried their own little ones to church on their shoulders and threw them into mass graves, from which arose such a stink that it was barely possible for anyone to go past a churchyard.” – Chronicler of Rochester 1349*<sup>260</sup>

When every existing churchyard was filled, new ground was consecrated to make room for the ever-increasing numbers of the dead.

*“The pope brought a field near Notre-Dame des Miracles and had it consecrated as a cemetery. By 14 March 11,000 bodies had been buried there, and that is in addition to those buried in the churchyards in the Hôpital de Saint-Antoine and the religious orders and in the many other churchyards in Avignon.”- Louis Heyligen (Sanctus) of Beeringen. 27 of April 1348.*<sup>261</sup>

Though we have chroniclers stating that people were “thrown” into mass graves, archaeological evidence from gravesites like east and west Smithfield<sup>262</sup> show that even though people died in enormous numbers, they still were usually laid out in the Christian custom, on their back facing west.<sup>263</sup> However, like the written record, the physical evidence will only ever show us what has survived the centuries. There are many reports of people being abandoned during the Black Death; if these abandoned people were not granted a proper funeral, their remains might not have survived the centuries if left exposed to the elements.<sup>264</sup>

Other remains we know have been lost because of the reaction of the contemporaries. In 1348 the 15-year-old Princess Joan of England died of plague when she was on her way to wed the prince of Castiel; she and her entourage stopped at the port city of Bordeaux and contracted the disease. When the King wanted to retrieve her body for a proper burial, he was informed that the entire port, including the building where Joan and retinue had taken up residence, had been burned to the ground by order of the mayor.<sup>265</sup> Hence there was not a body to retrieve, it had gone up in smoke.

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<sup>259</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *“Daily Life during the Black Death”* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 99.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 100.

<sup>261</sup> Horrox, Rosemary 1994 Translated and edited. *“Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death”* UK: Manchester University Press. Page 43.

<sup>262</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. *“Daily Life during the Black Death”* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 100.

<sup>263</sup> Stutz, Liv Nilsson and Tarlow, Sarah. 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of the archaeology of Death and Burial.* Oxford. Oxford University Press. Page 274.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 282.

<sup>265</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *“The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague”*: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 130.

Another way of body disposal that would not have left us any evidence was dumping the bodies in rivers. It became so bad that pope Clement VI had to bless the Rhone River as a sacred burial ground because so many people had dumped dead bodies into it.<sup>266</sup> Given the situation in Avignon and the surrounding area, pragmatism was the name of the game in 1348, something also seen in that he removed the spiritual penalties for people that had their last rites performed by non-members of the clergy or died without confessing their sins.<sup>267</sup>

Medieval society was thoroughly shaken by the arrival of the Black Death, one of the traits of the plague that was noted by many contemporaries was the quirk of the disease that many seemingly healthy people were struck down by the disease without the ability to confess their sins or have any of the social structures rites and rituals performed before or after their passing,<sup>268</sup> This was especially horrifying to contemporaries because they could not perform the transitional stage of dying properly. Given the importance of the eternal life in the Christian context, people that died alone and forgotten had exceedingly bad deaths. It was sudden, unprepared, and their bodies were not treated with the respect they hoped to receive. They would after all need them on the last day. Not to mention that many died unaccompanied, with no one to care for them, no one to pray for them, and no one to bury them. This was a societal and theological disaster. But it was a disaster caused by disease, and what did the highly religious medieval people think of disease?

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<sup>266</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. " *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* " Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 82.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., Page 82.

<sup>268</sup> Horrox, Rosemary 1994 Translated and edited. " *Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death* " UK: Manchester University Press. Page 245.

## Chapter 5. Sickness and Sin

There exists a long precedence in linking sickness and sin in human history. The most striking modern example is the AIDS epidemic, given the horrible moniker “the gay plague”, it sadly is still tearing through parts of the world today. What is perhaps more surprising is that the linking of often contagious diseases and divine punishment is an ancient belief. Even the word plague means strike or blow from above. In the ancient world, the God Apollo would strike you down with his plague arrows;<sup>269</sup> the word plague stems from the Latin *plaga*, meaning blow, wound, injury. The symbolism of the plague arrow was widely adopted in medieval art and literature, this extended to the saints that were associated with the protection against plague.

The most famous plague Saint was St. Sebastian; he was executed by being tied to a post and shot full of arrows during the pre-Christian days of the Roman Empire.<sup>270</sup> During the plague years, he experienced a surge of popularity together with approximately 100 other saints, linked to the plague after the 1347 outbreak.<sup>271</sup> It was believed that plague Saints possessed extraordinary healing abilities and/or, other abilities that could shield you and your communities from the disease.<sup>272</sup> The imagery of the Devine plague arrow striking from above is present in the bible when Job laments that “*The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshalled against me.*”<sup>273</sup> Job 6: 4

What is essential to understand is that the medieval world had inherited from the ancients a view of disease as something that was supernaturally distributed from above as a divine, a moral reaction to the immoral actions of the mortals.<sup>274</sup> This response could come in many forms, floods, droughts, war, and disease. These calamities were believed to have been triggered as a direct response for sinful acts. The punishment could be invoked by the conduct of a single individual or a group.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. “*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*” United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 19.

<sup>270</sup> Binski, Paul. 1996 “*Medieval death Ritual and Representation*” London: British Museum Press. Page 212.

<sup>271</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague.* Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 317.

<sup>272</sup> Binski, Paul. 1996 “*Medieval death Ritual and Representation*” London: British Museum Press. Page 212.

<sup>273</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=job+6%3A4&version=NIV> (19.04.22)

<sup>274</sup> Clark, David P. 2011. “*Germs, Genes, & Civilization: How Epidemics Shaped Who We Are Today*” Narrated by Summer McStravick. Electronic Book: Pearson. Chapter 1. (03:30)

<sup>275</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. “*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*” United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 19.

The ancient world had a way of cleansing itself of this sin through the scapegoat. Who offered the community the opportunity to ritualistically cleanse themselves by putting all their sins upon a chosen animal or human sacrifice.<sup>276</sup> The notion of ritualistic cleansing of sin is a motif that has been carried on in Christianity to this day, and is present in many rituals, including the burial. The image of plague as divine punishment is complicated in early Christianity when God sends down plagues to punish the prosecutors and restore justice by unleashing plagues upon the enemies of the people of God.<sup>277</sup> The most famous example is the Easter story in Exodus, when God sends down plagues and death upon the peoples of Egypt, and Moses demands that the Pharaoh "Let my people go."<sup>278</sup> or else. Here plague is used as a weapon and a force for good in the story's narrative. The Hebrews are released from their bondage and leave Egypt, but as the story notes, at a terrible cost to the Egyptians. "There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt—worse than there has ever been or ever will be again."<sup>279</sup> Exodus 11.6 In this biblical narrative, plague, and death through terrible, and a punishment for the actions of Pharaoh were a cause for good; in the end, the Jews are freed.

War, Famine, Plague and Death are not only seen in the Abrahamic traditions as something entirely negative but as tools used by God for the greater good. In the medieval and ancient world, God can choose to strike you down with disease and other calamities if he so wishes. Still, God was not the only explanation of why you were struck down with disease.

## Natural Causes

Just because there existed a way of explaining disease through supernatural means did not mean that it was the only way of understanding the world, neither did it exclude supplemental ways of understanding illness.

Human beings are the world's best pattern recognisers, **(source)** and we have not changed significantly over the centuries. It is not plausible that ancient and medieval peoples would not recognise natural patterns when it comes to the spreading of infectious disease, the drinking of unsafe water, and the effects of a bad diet. However, these observations did not

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<sup>276</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. "*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*" United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 35.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., Page 23.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., Page 35.

<sup>279</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+11.6&version=NIV> (19.04.22)

exclude the existence of an all-seeing, all-powerful God. Instead, the natural and the supernatural worlds interplayed with each other.<sup>280</sup>

We can see this interplay in the way the ancient and medieval world practised medicine, when peoples of the past stressed the importance of prayer and sacred healing rituals, whilst at the same time providing the sick with nutritious food, warm clothing, and the cleansing of wounds. How did the observability of a disease's infectiousness impact how it was perceived by a society that had no concept of microscopic contamination, epidemiology, or DNA? When humans of the past could presumably observe that some diseases were contagious, but others were seemingly not? That some people were born with diseases and others not? Why did you recover from some diseases and not from others? All these questions and more have been pondered over in the writings of medical practitioners throughout history; although we have come far in the modern world to answer many of these questions, we still do not have all the answers. Through the lens of a historian, we can see that the thinking of the causes behind disease, have shaped entire societal structures, behaviours, customs, and norms.

## Hippocrates and Galen

The most influential medical practitioners of the ancient world that influenced medieval practitioners and medical beliefs well into the Renaissance, was the thinking of the ancient physicians Hippocrates and Galen.<sup>281</sup>

The Roman physician Galen (CE 129- C.216) believed that disease was caused by bad air, often stemming from damp marshlands; the Miasma theory; illness comes as a consequence of an imbalance of the body's humors (bodily fluids). Galen's work builds on the foundations of the Greek physician and father of medicine, Hippocrates (C 460-C.360 BCE), who stressed the natural causes of disease, such as climate, occupation, and diet.<sup>282</sup> Crucially, the causes of sickness could also be the cures for it, in his teachings. Their theories are highly significant for the later development of the medical field because they did not blame the sick person for their illness; instead, they looked for causes outside the supernatural or moral character of the sufferer.

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<sup>280</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. "*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*" United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 26.

<sup>281</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. "*Encyclopedia of the Black Death*" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 158.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 175.



Nevertheless, neither Galen nor Hippocrates ever claimed that supernatural forces did not impact disease. However, they always tried to explain sickness as a function of the natural world, even if that natural world included astrology.

It is noteworthy to read the beliefs of Galen and Hippocrates because they were so influential in the many centuries following them, and because their emphasis on the amoral causes for disease, signified that in their society, there existed a belief that there was a moral cause of disease, which makes sense if disease is caused by the displeasure of divine entities and a moral universe. Why elms point to amoral causes for disease if a moral belief of its cause did not already exist? During the Black Death several Universities produced medical treatises to explain the cause of the plague,<sup>283</sup> these explanations were based on Galen's Miasma theory. Like Galen, they did not exclude the supernatural as the ultimate cause of disease and healing, rather they divided disease into near and far causes.<sup>284</sup> The near causes were suggested to be earthquakes, bad weather and bad air.<sup>285</sup> The far causes were astrological movements and an angry God.<sup>286</sup>

## Sickness, Skin, and Sin

In the medieval world it was believed that the state of one's body reflected the state of one's soul. A healthy body reflected a healthy soul,<sup>287</sup> conversely, the opposite is true; an unhealthy body reflected an unhealthy soul. This importance of the state of the mortal body and the fear of corruption is understandable in a world without antibiotics, where a minor infection could be fatal. The most obvious sign of sickness would be visible signs on the skin. It is the biggest organ in the body, and even though medieval people did not have the same standards and opportunities for skincare that we have today, they still would have a perception what was considered normal and unhealthy skin. We can see this understanding in the massive stigma and laws directed toward people with severe and contagious skin conditions. Lesions on the skin were seen as a sign of immorality, especially lepers were believed to be spiritually and morally corrupted.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*. Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 132.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 23.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 231.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 243.

<sup>287</sup> Hartnell, Jack. 2019 "*Medieval Bodies, Life and Death in the Middle Ages*" Narrated by: Michael Page. Unabridged Audiobook. Electronic Book: HighBridge. Audio. Chapter 1. (00:43:00)

<sup>288</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. "*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS*." United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 46.

There existed ancient fears that lepers would spread their disease through the water supply, an accusation directed against Jewish communities before, during and after the outbreak of the Black Death.<sup>289</sup> Skin lesions, immorality and leprosy have been closely connected throughout history.<sup>290</sup> In the ancient world, the treatment of the lepers may have been worse than that of the medieval one. Being thrown out of cities and tribes, having to wear torn clothes, and being shouted at with the words "Unclean! Unclean!"<sup>291</sup> They were compared to corpses in that they were socially and spiritually dead.<sup>292</sup> There did exist some societal fail-safes if you were to be branded as a leper and shunned from society, even in the ancient world, but the link between skin lesions and being perceived as unclean was well established throughout the ancient world, as was the belief that the disease was a punishment from God.<sup>293</sup>

Though the stigma of being a leper was by no means removed by the Middle Ages, the practice of segregating them from society was primarily used in times of crisis in the medieval world "when concerns about epidemic disease, disorder and vagrancy were running high," something that happened during the plague 1347- 1352.<sup>294</sup>

Under normal circumstances, lepers were deserving some compassion from the Christian community. This can be seen in the establishment of hospitals and leprosariums (hospices for lepers) during the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century, it is estimated that there existed 19,000 such charitable institutions on the continent.<sup>295</sup> During later outbreaks of the plague, cities and towns established pesthouses that took in people that were suspected to suffer from plague, building on a similar model of containing the disease,<sup>296</sup> and treating the sick. How well the sick were treated in these Leprosarium's and Pesthouses varied considerably,<sup>297</sup> and there are reports of pesthouses being burned down by angry mobs.<sup>298</sup>

Under extraordinary circumstances, people that suffered from leprosy or were perceived to suffer from leprosy could suffer persecution, violence, and segregation during

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<sup>289</sup> Hartnell, Jack. 2019 "*Medieval Bodies, Life and Death in the Middle Ages*" Narrated by: Michael Page. Unabridged Audiobook. Electronic Book: HighBridge. Audio. Chapter 4. (18:00)

<sup>290</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. "*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*" United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 46.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., Page 46.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., Page 46.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., Page 47.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., Page 52.

<sup>295</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2006. "*Daily Life during the Black Death*" Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 136.

<sup>296</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague.* Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 420.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., Page 421.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., Page 421.

times of unrest, such as the plague years. Similar treatments were given to other marginalised groups during the Middle Ages. The Jews were often branded as spiritual lepers and, like the lepers, lived in special parts of the community, and were made to wear identifying clothing or small bells,<sup>299</sup> to mark them out from the general public.<sup>300</sup>

To me this marking out the lepers and other people with obvious contagious diseases witnesses again that though cruel, the people of the Middle Ages did understand contagion to some degree.

## Plague? Leper?

The cultural significance of the treatment of lepers and other people who suffered from severe skin lesions is vital as the *Yersinia Pestis* often leaves the sufferer with visible marks on the skin; even if the subject survives, they were often left with signs of the plague.<sup>301</sup> In the sources, there are references to people with "the mark of the plague," something that can happen when one contract plague and experience internal bleeding into the skin.<sup>302</sup> In a time before modern diagnostics, there was not really a focus on diagnosing one ailment over another. If you were a medieval person and you encountered another individual with swollen lymph nodes and skin lesions,<sup>303</sup> it did not really matter what they had so long as they stayed away from you. If this person had died, they were often recorded to have died from the plague, but they might have died from another disease entirely.<sup>304</sup>

For modern historians the distinction between leprosy and plague is also unclear because many art depictions of leprosy have been misinterpreted as depictions of plague. A famous example of this, is the depiction of four clerics suffering from leprosy "presumably" standing and getting instructions from a bishop, taken from the Latin encyclopaedia, *Omne Bonum* written by the clerk James le Palmer, circa 1365.<sup>305</sup> It was labelled by the British Library as a depiction of plague, however the historian Monica H Green studied the

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<sup>299</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. "Encyclopedia of the Black Death" Santa Barbara: ABC. Page 32.

<sup>300</sup> Alcabes, Phillip. 2009. "Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fuelled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu": Narrated by Simon Prebble. Electronic Book: Audible Studios. Audio. Chapter 2. (22:00)

<sup>301</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. "From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages": Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 84.

<sup>302</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague": Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 38.

<sup>303</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2017 "Hansen's Disease (Leprosy) Signs and Symptoms" <https://www.cdc.gov/leprosy/symptoms/index.html> (24.04.22)

<sup>304</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague": Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 445.

<sup>305</sup> Jones, Lori and Nevell, Richard. 2016 "Plagued by doubt and viral misinformation: the need for evidence-based use of historical disease images" *The Lancet, Infectious Disease*. VOLUME 16, ISSUE 10, E235-E240. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(16\)30119-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(16)30119-0/fulltext) (24.04.22)

manuscript and pointed out that if these clerics were indeed advanced plague victims, they would not have been able to stand and listen to the bishop.<sup>306</sup> The British Library has since corrected the caption, but the image has been spread and used as a depiction of plague, even by credible historians, such as “Joseph, P Byrne”.<sup>307</sup>

During the Middle Ages there was not a clear diagnostic way of knowing what was killing 50 per cent of the population; they reported what they saw, and experienced, using their own reference points. It is engaging in a cultural aspect that the disease ravaging Europe often left visible marks upon its victims when the society had such a complicated view of sickness, skin, and sin. The medieval world being a Christian one they understood sickness with a religious mindset, but the Christian view of sickness and sin is complex. This complexity is apparent in the biblical story of Job, where the problem of suffering is addressed in the bible.

In a Christian world, where God is all-powerful, why do good people suffer calamities, misfortune, and sickness? Does the sick deserve to suffer? And if not, why do God allow suffering?

## The Duality of the Book of Job

The complexity of beliefs regarding suffering and marks upon the skin in the Christian community can be found in the biblical story of Job.

The story starts with God and the Satan; in this story, Satan is a noun meaning the "accuser" and does not have the same negative connotations that it does later in the Christian literature.<sup>308</sup> The accuser and God have a conversation considering the true beliefs of a good and pious man; this man is Job. Job has experienced great fortune in his life, having material wealth, a large family and good health. God praises his loyal servant describing him as: *“There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”*<sup>309</sup> Job 1:8

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., (24.04.22)

<sup>307</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. " *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* " Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Front cover.

<sup>308</sup> Miller II, Robert D. 2019. " *Understanding the Old Testament* " Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 132.

<sup>309</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+1%3A8+&version=NIV> (20.04.22)

The accuser replies that Job only praises him because God has provided all these gifts upon him and that his demeanour is contingent on his good fortune.<sup>310</sup> His righteous behaviour is thus conditional, and not true belief according to the accuser.

God and Satan agree that to test out if Job truly is a righteous man or not, Satan is allowed to inflict harm upon Job and his family; however, in the beginning, God commands that.

"The Lord said to Satan, "Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger."<sup>311</sup> Job 1:12 Job loses his children and his wealth. Nevertheless, when this does not sway Job's faithfulness, Satan is allowed to inflict bodily harm upon Job to test his faith when he argues to God that. "Skin for skin!" Satan replied. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face."<sup>312</sup> Job 2.4 and 2.5. Job is then afflicted with loathsome sores, from the crown of his head to the bottom of his feet, leaving him sitting on a pile of ashes, scraping his wounds with a potshard.<sup>313</sup> Again, diseased skin comes as a result of a divine will from above.

Job's wife asks him why he does not curse God for all that has been done to him, but he steadfastly refuses.<sup>314</sup> Later, Job is visited by his three friends who start a dialogue with him, asking if he has done anything to anger God, for my else would God punish him so?

The arguments of Jobs' friends are the same arguments used to explain a moral universe. In which "good things happen to good people, and bad things happen to bad people, so Job must have done something wrong."<sup>315</sup> Regardless of his friends' arguments, Job is steadfast in his assessment of himself; he has done nothing wrong in the eyes of the Lord, and he does not understand why he is being punished. In the end, God comes down to earth in the form of a whirlwind, chastising Job because even though Job held on to his faith throughout his ordeal, who is he to question the almighty creator of the universe? "*Can a mortal be more righteous than God? Can even a strong man be more pure than his Maker?*"<sup>316</sup> Job 4:17

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<sup>310</sup> Miller II, Robert D. 2019. "Understanding the Old Testament" Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 132.

<sup>311</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+1%3A12&version=NIV> (20.04.22)

<sup>312</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+2&version=NIV> (20.04.22)

<sup>313</sup> Miller II, Robert D. 2019. "Understanding the Old Testament" Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 133.

<sup>314</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. 2008. "God's Problem, The Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer." Narrated by: L. J. Ganzer. Unabridged Audiobook. Electronic Book: HarperAudio. Audio. Chapter 6 (18:40)

<sup>315</sup> Miller II, Robert D. 2019. "Understanding the Old Testament" Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 133.

<sup>316</sup> Bible. New international version. (2022)

In the end, Job is granted back his health, wealth, and a brand-new set of children. It is emphasized that this is not a reward for persisting but because God wished it so. The nature of why good people suffer is not given a clear answer in the story, but it is stressed that if you are righteous, you still might suffer for reasons unknown, and if that is the case, you should still persist and not stray from God, because you cannot know Gods ultimate plan.<sup>317</sup>

### “Unpack” the Story of Job

Religious scholars have pondered over the duality of the story, and many have concluded that it is a composition of two or more different writers compiled into a single narrative.<sup>318</sup> This would explain why the story and the dialogues come to two seemingly different conclusions regarding the nature of suffering and why people in the story, mainly Job's friends, go from comforting him in one moment to accusing him of wrongdoing in the next during the dialogues.<sup>319</sup>

Suffering as a test from God is something that is not exclusive to the book of Job. In Genesis 22, the offering of Isak, God asks Abraham to offer up his son Isak as a burnt offering to sacrifice him to God; this was done as a test of faith.<sup>320</sup> The main takeaway for the Christians from this story and the book of Job is that you might not know exactly why you suffer; it might be because you have sinned, it might not; either way, you must always preserve your faith as you are a mere human and you do not know Gods plan. Another lesson is that good Christians should not judge the sick for their illness. That behaviour is chastised in the story when God reprimands Job's wife and friends for judging him for his plight. This part of the narrative reveals that the culture where the belief that sickness came as a result of divine punishment existed during the writing of the story.

Seeing as it was necessary to keep telling the story of Job long after the original writing and the popularity of the plague arrows in art, literature, and the concept of divine punishment being so complicated in the biblical narrative.

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<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Job+4.17&version=NIV> (20.04.22)

<sup>317</sup> Miller II, Robert D. 2019. “*Understanding the Old Testament*” Electronic Book: The Great Courses and The Teaching Company. Page 136.

<sup>318</sup> Ehrman, Bart D. 2008. “*God's Problem, The Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer.*” Narrated by: L. J. Ganzer. Unabridged Audiobook. Electronic Book: HarperAudio. Audio. Chapter 6 (19:30)

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., Chapter 6 (20:10)

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., Chapter 6 (26:00)

It is not surprising that the idea that the sick deserved their plight persisted throughout history<sup>321</sup> and it is not unexpected that during the Black Death the notion of cleansing yourself, and the world from the wrath of an angry God from sin manifested in different ways on the continent.

The ending of the book of Job complicates the matter further because God heals Job, so just as Devine punishment can come down from above, so can divine healing; this is not a new notion in the Christian tradition. Early Christianity was known as a religion of healers.<sup>322</sup> The plague saints offered protection and healing for the plague, but only if God wished it so.<sup>323</sup> The book of Job and the concept of sin and disease in the Middle Ages is, in a word, complicated. A good Christian was supposed to take care of the sick, but at the same time some sick were more deserving than others. In the bible plague could be a punishment for sin by a single individual or it could be a punishment for the behaviour of the entire community. But it could also be used as a tool for good and a test of faith. The prevailing belief during the Black Death was the God was angry at humanity, and there are examples of individuals and communities trying too cleans themselves of sin and appease God.

### How Do We Know That the People of the Middle Ages Knew This Story?

The Bible was the most distributed and read book in Europe during the Middle Ages. Christianity was a mandatory part of society, not to mention that this story's central message is beneficial for the church to distribute. Suffering is hard to explain, but one must always keep faith in God. Its high distribution can also be seen in the many secular morality plays that were circulated during the Middle Ages that took inspiration from the book of Job and other biblical narratives<sup>324</sup> It can also be seen in that some churches from the late Middle Ages were dedicated to Job together with some ex votos.<sup>325</sup>

I have yet to read a single source that claims that the bible and the storey of Job and the concept of sin and Devine punishment were unknown to the masses in western Europe during the 1300s. With this in mind, how did medieval society react when it encountered a

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<sup>321</sup> Alcabes, Phillip. 2009. "*Dread: How Fear and Fantasy Have Fuelled Epidemics from the Black Death to Avian Flu*": Narrated by Simon Prebble. Electronic Book: Audible Studios. Audio. Chapter 5 Part (05:30).

<sup>322</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part 13:00.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., Chapter 25 Part 08:00.

<sup>324</sup> University of Rochester. 2010. "*The Castle of Perseverance*" Klausner, David N. (Editor) <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/klausner-castle-of-perseverance-introduction> (18.04.22)

<sup>325</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. "*Encyclopedia of the Black Death*" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 197.

plague that left most of its victims with visible marks upon their skin, had an exceedingly high mortality rate and apparently struck everyone?



# Chapter 6. The Black Death and the Church

## Knowing Plague Is on the Way

The Plague travelled through Christian Europe following a pattern Ole Jørgen Benedictow labelled "metastatic leaps,"<sup>326</sup> showing up early on the maps at trading ports and cities before jumping inland following the rivers or roads, it could jump over unconnected towns and villages; however, word of the Plague often arrived before the disease did.

One of the fascinating features of the spread of the Black Death is that the people knew it was coming before it arrived. We can see this in the letters sent from Avignon in where Louis Heyligen (Sanctus) warns his friends and family that there is a plague coming from the south and east.

*"I am writing to you, most dearly beloved, so that you should know in what peril we are now living. And if you wish to preserve yourselves, the best advice is that a man should eat and drink moderately, and avoid getting cold, and refrain from any excess, and above all mix little with people, unless it be with a few who have healthy breath; but it is best to stay at home until the epidemic has passed. According to astrologers the epidemic takes ten years to complete its cycle, of which three have now elapsed, and so it is to be feared that in the end it will have encircled the whole world although they say that it will affect cold regions more slowly."*<sup>327</sup>

*"On 31 December 1347 three galleys loaded with spices and other goods put into the port of Genoa after being storm-driven from the East. They were horribly infected, and when the Genoese realized this, and that other men were dying suddenly without remedy, the ships were driven from the port with burning arrows and other engines of war. For there was no one who had dared to touch them or do business with them who did not immediately die. And thus, driven from port to port, one of the galleys at last put in at Marseille, and at its arrival the same thing happened: men were infected without realizing it, and died suddenly, and the inhabitants thereupon drove the galley away."*<sup>328</sup>

We can see that they knew it was coming from the west, in the letter from 1350 written by king Magnus of Sweden when he writes:

*"God for the sins of men has struck the world with this great punishment of sudden death. By it most of the people in the land to the west of our country are dead. It is now ravaging Norway and Holland and is approaching our kingdom of Sweden."*<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague": Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 117.

<sup>327</sup> Horrox, Rosemary 1994 Translated and edited. "Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death" UK: Manchester University Press. Page 45.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., Page 42.

<sup>329</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague": Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 203.

We see this knowledge in how local communities tried to keep out the disease before it arrived. In Milan, the Visconti restricted access to the city for travellers and merchants.<sup>330</sup> Quarantine restrictions for the sick were so tight that Milan only saw a 15 per cent death rate.<sup>331</sup> Which is incredibly low compared to other cities with similar populations. Other cities and communities tried to eradicate what they saw as the cause of the disease by locating conspiracies and scapegoats. The Jewish populations of Europe were targeted as the cause of the disease, in what has been dubbed “the greatest massacre of Jews in Europe prior to the modern, twentieth century Holocaust.”<sup>332</sup> In Strasburg, the city pre-emptively burned its Jewish population, believing that they were responsible for spreading the disease by poisoning the wells.<sup>333</sup> The city did not escape the ravages of the Black Death.

Iceland and Finland escaped the plague of the 1340s because of their relative isolation.<sup>334</sup> A ship that was headed to Reykjavik from Bergen refrained from setting sail when plague broke out amongst its crew<sup>335</sup> and they cancelled their journey, saving the island from infection until 1402.<sup>336</sup> Finland was sparsely populated with few urban centres; it was therefore not ideal for the spread of any of the three forms of the plague.<sup>337</sup> It was believed for a time that Poland had escaped the Black Death because there were so few records of the disease from the area, but Ole Benedictow pointed out the unlikelihood that Poland would have escape the fate of its surrounding neighbours. He pointed to the practice of the former communist state to suppress researched that could undermined a Marxist understanding of history.<sup>338</sup> The historian Dorsey Armstrong supports Benedictow’s conclusion, noting that:

*“Where once there seemed to be consensus that (Poland) had managed to escape the worst of the Black Death, in fact, it experienced it on a level similar to what was occurring throughout the rest of the medieval world.”*<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>330</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*”: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 404.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., Page 405.

<sup>332</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. “*From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*”: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 158.

<sup>333</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*”: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 131.

<sup>334</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. “*From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*”: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 81.

<sup>335</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*”: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 400.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., Page 400.

<sup>337</sup> Aberth, John. 2010. “*From the brink of the Apocalypse, confronting famine, war, plague, and death in the late Middle Ages*”: Second edition. Oxon: Routledge. Page 81.

<sup>338</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. “*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*”: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 410.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., Page 411.

I would agree with their assessments, as I see no demographic, cultural, economic, or other reason for Poland to have escaped the Black Death at the time.

The plague spread through the continent by showing up at different locations, at different times. One wave of the plague would crash into another as the disease spread from the major trading cities and spread inland. We can trace the spread of the disease from the DNA of the different *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria found at gravesites.<sup>340</sup> However, the plague also showed up in locations that did not have strong trade connections. Demonstrating that the disease was not only spread by traveling merchants and trade. There was another large group of people that were on the move during the late medieval period, and this group was intimately connected to the religious beliefs and practices of the international Catholic Church.

## Pilgrims

Going on pilgrimage had been a part of medieval society for a long time.<sup>341</sup> As an evangelising religion it was a fundamental belief of early Christians that one was supposed to spread the religion. In a mostly illiterate world without instant media, the way of doing this was to travel. During the Late Middle Ages most of the continent had been Christianised, but the practise of going on religious journeys had not disappeared.

The most memorable example of Christians on the move during the Middle Ages were the Crusaders, who were granted indulgences for going too and defending the holy land from the infidels. For the people that were not able or willing to travel all the way to Jerusalem, there were other local sites that were used as pilgrimage; Rome being the most holy example.

<sup>342</sup>

There were many reasons for a person to head out on pilgrimage. If you were heading to the papal court in Rome, or as the situation was after 1309, Avignon, you might ask for a papal dispensation, indulgences, or forgiveness for sin. If convicted for a particularly grievous sin for example murder, your punishment might be to go on an eternal pilgrimage, wrapped in chains.<sup>343</sup> When the chains fell off your sins were forgiven.

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<sup>340</sup> Haensch S, Bianucci R, Signoli M, Rajerison M, Schultz M, Kaacki S, Vermunt M, Weston DA, Hurst D, Achtman M, Carniel E, Bramanti B. 2010. *Distinct Clones of Yersinia pestis Caused the Black Death*. *Ploce Patogens. Journal*. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2951374/> (26.04.22)

<sup>341</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part (28:00)

<sup>342</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2012. "*Encyclopedia of the Black Death*" Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 273.

<sup>343</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part (31:00)

Another more common reason for going on pilgrimage was to seek out saints for Divine healing.<sup>344</sup> Many holy shrines were built for the purpose of healing the sick, and some saints were seen to have specialised in specific ailments.<sup>345</sup> Some of these sites the bodies of the saints were on display and people could literally touch them.<sup>346</sup> In some cases pilgrims even ingested water that supposedly contained some of the saints remains.<sup>347</sup> Since the population of Europe knew there was a deadly disease spreading on the continent, many responded by going on pilgrimage to ask God's forgiveness. They did not have to travel all the way to the holy land, most pilgrims set out to the nearest holy shrine or site;<sup>348</sup> several did this before their communities were touched by the plague.

Considerable amounts of people headed out to holy sites either to ask for divine healing or to ask God to spare their communities.

To a modern mind, this behaviour was disastrous. The last thing one needs during a highly infectious and deadly disease is thousands of people moving around and flocking together at holy sites<sup>349</sup> creating super spreader events. Breathing in the same air and swapping local infections. Travel during the medieval time often included sleeping in close proximity to other people and animals. If the Black Death was caused only by *Yersinia Pestis*, it is highly doubtful that it was the only disease swapped at these sites. Bringing them back with them to their communities, spreading the disease faster.

We can trace the effects of the pilgrims by looking at the infection dates at particularly holy places. The holy city of Santiago de Compostela was infected much earlier than expected, when looking at its geographic position west on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>350</sup> The same story repeated itself at other holy sites all over the continent. One factor that must be remembered is that holy sites were not tourist attractions; they were places that had tremendous monetary value for the Church because pilgrims often offered a donation to the local monastery or Church.<sup>351</sup> There was some competition amongst the clergy to get the most high-profile relics to embellish their site because that would attract the most pilgrims and,

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<sup>344</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio Chapter 25 Part 13:00.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., Chapter 25 Part 06:30.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., Chapter 25 Part 16:00.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., Chapter 25 Part. 16:00.

<sup>348</sup> Horrox, Rosemary 1994 Translated and edited. "*Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death*" UK: Manchester University Press. Page 54.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., Page 54.

<sup>350</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. "*The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague*": Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 92.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., Page 322.

therefore, more funds, creating the phenomenon known as holy kidnappings of the earthly remains of saints also known as "pious theft".<sup>352</sup>

To have the privilege of being buried in close proximity to a Saint, to touch their remains or to invoke them directly through their connection, both too the heavenly court and the earth, the importance of the burial grounds, and the earthly remains of the saints is understandable in the medieval world. Even the hierarchical thinking of the time is evoked with the saints when they are referred to as lords and ladies in prayers. Their resting places inevitable became important for the people of the period. The shrines were often encompassed by the bureaucratic, economic, and learning centres of the Church. When these places were struck down early and hard, the impact affected the Church hierarchy.

## The End of the World

Since almost everything in the medieval world was seen through a Christian lens, the prevailing belief regarding the cause of the disease was that God was angry, and this was his punishment. There are many examples of God punishing entire communities and ending the world in the Biblical text. The stories of Moses, Exodus, Noah and the second coming of Christ during the Apocalypse are all tales where mankind suffer immensely by the hand of God. In the last example, it marked the literal end of the world.<sup>353</sup> With this in mind, it is no wonder that the people of the medieval world interpreted the plague as a direct consequence of the divine will or displeasure.<sup>354</sup>

According to the three estates model, it was the duty of the second estate to placate God. The second estate had been given a sacred duty in medieval society to safeguard the souls and guide them to a fulfilling afterlife. However, now God was seemingly so angry at them that he had apparently decided to wipe everyone from the world, paralleling the Old Testament flood and the Apocalypse. Too add to the misery, God had chosen to wipe out the population by means of a disease that left marks upon the skin, showing his displeasure.

The sentiment that this was God's punishment is a reoccurring theme throughout the documents in everything from personal letters and official decrees to the medical literature and official accounts. The Irish chronicler John Clynn wrote:

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<sup>352</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 25 Part (09:30)

<sup>353</sup> Oden, Robert. 2013. "God and Mankind: Comparative Religions" Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 44.

<sup>354</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. "*The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350 A brief history with documents.*" New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 6.

*" And so that the writing may not perish with the writer, and at the same time the work may not cease with the workman, I bequest the parchment for continuing the work, if by chance a man, or anyone descended from Adam, should remain behind in the future who can escape this pestilence and continue the work I have begun." <sup>355</sup>*

Everywhere it reappears, God is not happy with us, and this might be the end of the world.<sup>356</sup> There exists some distinction between the two, if the world was truly coming to an end, and these were the last days, then the dead would soon rise from their graves and be reaped for a better life in heaven.<sup>357</sup> Something that could potentially have been a comfort during the plague. But if this was not the Apocalypse, but rather an expression of Gods displeasure, then the second estate had failed in its mission. The task of the second estate was to safeguard the medieval society from the wrath of God, but as the historian Philip Ziegler stated: "All that the Church had done was wait until it was too late and then point out to their flock how wicked they had been."<sup>358</sup>

## Death Toll in the Church

It did not help matters that God did not spare the men and women of the cloth from the pestilence. They died in equal or even higher numbers than the laity. With large gatherings of pilgrims flocking to holy sites and priests, clerics and monks having a job where close proximity to the sick and dying were required, it is not surprising that many orders of the Church experienced significant personnel losses during the Plague. The losses were devastating for the church. With a mortality rate of around 50 per cent or above, in a small and elite part of the population.<sup>359</sup> Some monastic orders lost almost every member, with a mortality rate of 90 per cent.<sup>360</sup> The Dominicans at the University of Montpellier consisted of 140 members: only 7 survived. Of the 160 at Maguellore in Languedoc, there were also only 7 survivors.<sup>361</sup> 4 out of the 30 members of the Llanthony Augustinian priory in England survived.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Aberth, John. 2005. *"The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350 A brief history with documents."* New York: Bedford /St. Martin's. Page 5.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., Page 6.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., Page 162.

<sup>358</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *"The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague"*: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 288.

<sup>359</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *"The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague"*: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 299.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>361</sup> Note that the number seven is a holy number and may have been used symbolically in medieval sources.

<sup>362</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2012. *"Encyclopedia of the Black Death"* Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO. Page 151.

In these monastic orders one often found the brightest and the most devoted members of the second estate. They were the teachers, record keepers, community leaders, and bureaucrats of the medieval world. When these people did their holy duty, they almost always paid the price with their own lives. The historian Philip Ziegler summed the situation in the church up as follows: *"The Church was a victim of the Black Death because of the legion of its most competent and dedicated officers who had perished."*<sup>363</sup>

It is noteworthy that so few people doing their duty during the first wave of the plague were later recognised by the church as saints.<sup>364</sup> The individuals acknowledged by the church as plague saints were long dead figures as St. Sebastian who died during the roman empire, later plague saints were martyred during later outbreaks.<sup>365</sup> The historian Samuel Chon raises this inquiry, pointing out that this is understudied by religious scholars and art historians. For me this might indicate that the people doing their duties died, and the people that could have reported or preserved their stories also died.

One interesting feature with the first wave of the Black Death is the many reports of abandonment that do not occur with the same amount of frequency in later outbreaks. It might have been the case that we do not have any stories of plague saints from the first wave, because the people that were worthy of saint status caught the disease and died so fast that no one were there to preserve their stories. Or more depressingly, the people that might have performed these acts of bravery fled from the sick, leaving them to die alone. For my part, I lean to the former explanation for the lack of plague saints, though the latter cannot be counted out entirely without more research.

## Flight

The people who made up and were recruited to the second estate, were most often second and third children of the first estate due to primogeniture. This meant that many people that held clerical offices did not necessarily choose to enter a religious order or house of their own volition. I have already remarked on the many reform movements and contemporary comments on the worldliness of the medieval Church. However, during the Plague, the situation got worse since it takes a lot of earnest conviction and bravery to step into the sickroom, of a person dying from a clearly infectious disease, knowing you will most likely

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<sup>363</sup> Armstrong, Dorsey. 2016. *"The Black Death, The World's Most Devastating Plague"*: Electronic Book: The Great Courses. Page 304.

<sup>364</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. *"Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS."* United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 91-92.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., Page 92.

also contract the disease. From the disproportional high mortality numbers of the clergy, we know that many people did go into the sick rooms and contract the disease, but there are also complaints that many people of the second estate chose not to do their duties, and like many others, they fled. During the plague this behaviour was remarked upon by the Bishop of Bath and Wells who exclaimed in January 1349 that:

*"Because priests cannot be found for love or money to take on the responsibility of visiting the sick or administering the sacraments of the church to them- perhaps because they fear they will catch the disease themselves - we understand that many people are dying without the sacrament of penance."<sup>366</sup>*

The archbishop of Canterbury echoed this sentiment on the 28 of May 1350, when he issued the constitution *Effrenata*. He relays that the laity had complained to him of priests that had fled, were asking for better-paying positions and were demanding exorbitant fees to perform their duties.<sup>367</sup> This behaviour did not endear the clergy to the laity, especially since they had such an important role to perform with the last rites and the funeral mass. However, at the time, it was necessary for the church to invoke pragmatic measures.

## Pragmatism

During the plague years, it was necessary for the church to invoke some pragmatic measures due to the sheer scope of the personnel loss, otherwise these societal important rituals would not have been performed. In his decree on the 10 of January 1349, the Bishop of Bath displayed one such pragmatic measure when he opened up for emergency confessions to the laity.

*"To make it known speedily and publicly... to everyone, but particularly to those who have already fallen sick, that if when on the point of death they cannot secure the services of a properly ordained priest, they should make confession of their sins, according to the teachings of the apostles, to any layperson, even to a woman if a man is not available."<sup>368</sup>*

The pope went even further, granting a full dispensation or indulgence for anyone "in the true faith"<sup>369</sup> who had died of the plague even if the last sacraments had not been performed.

These are rather extraordinary measures, since the last rite is so transformational.

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<sup>366</sup> Horrox, Rosemary. 1994. Translated and edited. *"Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death"* UK: Manchester University Press. Page 271.

<sup>367</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2004. *"The Black Death"*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 67.

<sup>368</sup> Horrox, Rosemary. 1994. Translated and edited. *"Manchester Medieval Sources Series: The Black Death"* UK: Manchester University Press. Page 272.

<sup>369</sup> Byrne, Joseph P. 2004. *"The Black Death"*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 75.



The men of the church were holy and were thought to have special transformative powers, power that were not supposed to be available to the layman.<sup>370</sup>

One example of these power is the Eucharist, turning the wine and bread into the literal body of Christ, they had similar transformative power when it came to the granting of indulgences and absolution for sin.<sup>371</sup> But even the pope could still not grant relief from the punishment of the original sin of Adam, which was Death (Romans 6:23)

During the Middle Ages, it was believed that prayer on the behalf of the departed would shorten the time in purgatory. Purgatory was a well-established belief before the late medieval period, but it was ratified in 1215 at the fourth Lateran council.<sup>372</sup> It was universally believed that almost everyone would have to spend some time in purgatory before they were granted entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>373</sup> However, it was possible to shorten the time in purgatory by praying for the soul of the departed, and you really wanted your time in purgatory to be as short as possible, as demonstrated in Dante's Comedy, it was not a pleasant place to spend any length of time in. Painful on a level surpassing every mortal experience. It was customary to pray for the soul of the departed in the time before the plague and donate funds to the church for mass to be said, but this practice would change during and after the plague.

The belief in Purgatory was problematic during the plague, because so many people had died that there were not enough people to pray for or remember the individual dead. Communities organised common prayers and processions during the plague, and Pope Clement V wrote a special Mass that "*Granted 260 days of indulgences to all penitents, being truly committed and confessed, who heard the following Mass...*"<sup>374</sup>

Because of the belief in purgatory, many medieval people had stipulations in their will regarding the number of prayers that were to be said on their behalf to shorten their time.<sup>375</sup> Due to the high mortality in the clergy and abandonment during the first wave, it is not a stretch to imagine that many of these testamentary guarantees and wishes for prayer went unfulfilled.

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<sup>370</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 22 Part. 06:00

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., Chapter 24 Part 08:30

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., Chapter 24 Part 03:30

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., Chapter 24 Part 02:00

<sup>374</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. "*The Black Death*" Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 68.

Page 77.

<sup>375</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. "*Medieval Christianity a New History*" Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 24 Part (13:30)

It was not only that so many people were dying that was a problem during the plague, but the manner of their deaths. They died suddenly, without the benefits of confession, or absolution. They died with visible marks upon their skin in a society that had stigmatised contagious skin lesions for thousands of years as a marks of Devine punishment and sin. Invoking the old question from the book of Job, have I done something wrong to deserve this fate? But worst of all, during the first wave of the plague, many died completely abandoned and alone.

## Abandonment

There has been some debate regarding the abandonment issue and the Black Death. The most famous account of abandonment from the first wave comes from Boccaccio's introduction to the Decameron; it is both the setup for the story and a description of the situation in the city of Florence. Boccaccio was not the only writer who wrote of people abandoning each other during the plague, De' Mussi, Villani, and Petrarch all touched upon the subject of abandonment and flight. This is however, according to the findings of the historian Chon a phenomenon of the first wave of the pandemic and not the subsequent waves.<sup>376</sup> Later outbreaks are similar to the first with them referring to the high mortality, sin, sorrow, and other symptoms but the breaking up of the family unit is not as common after the first outbreak in the 1340s.

It has been suggested that the abandonment narrative was a literary device, made up by Boccaccio and other influential writers and not a real historical occurrence. Cohn makes a convincing argument when he points out that text such as the Decameron would have been better known and more influential over time, not lesser, and why would people not copy what they read?<sup>377</sup>

I am inclined to agree with Cohn's conclusion, because it would have been observable that it was not useful to abandonee family members during the first outbreak, a practice most sources from the first wave found horrible; accounts of flight during the second and subsequent waves have families fleeing together.

The futility of flight is apparent from DNA analyses and from Benedictow's "metastatic leaps" showing us how hard it would have been to predict where the Plague would strike next.

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<sup>376</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 2018. "*Epidemics Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS.*" United Kingdom: Oxford University press. Page 59.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., Page 64,

You could not escape the plague in the 1340s. But during the outbreak of the 1360s you might at least die with some close by.

It was not only the bonds between family members that were disturbed during the plague but the hierarchical bonds of loyalty between lords and vassals, something that had a major social, political, and economic consequences for the later period.

For the church the plague had both practical and theological consequences.

## Long-term impact

The most long-term impactful change brought about by the Plague was the lowering of the standards in the ranks of the Church. Even when bearing in mind the recruitment practices of the medieval Church, they still comprised the part of society that had an indispensable role.<sup>378</sup> They were the people that had been taught how to read and or write. In a mainly illiterate society, this skill was highly valued, especially when considering that the printing press was not yet invented and having men that could write was indispensable. After the plague, the sacred duty of dealing with the dead and all the other tasks of the Church still had to be performed, but the Church now had to recruit people that lacked the necessary skills. Henry Kingston lamented that.

*“In a very short time there came crowding into orders a great multitude whose wives had died in the pestilence. As might be expected of laymen many of these were illiterate and those how knew how to read could not understand what it was, they read.”*<sup>379</sup> Henry Kingston 1350s

After the first wave of the plague, many priests were illiterate. They did not understand the Latin service they were performing, undermining the Christian religion, as reciting the Bible is a significant part of the religious rites and rituals. As the general reading competency in the Church declined in the years following the plague, the use of vernacular language would increase in general, not just in the Church but outside it. We can see this usage in the many Ars Mondi books and artworks that would become popularised later in the centuries that the art of dying and the art of dying, well had become a concern where the laity had taken more of an interest and responsibility.

The laity would, in general, take a higher interest in the art of dying, reflected in the development of art and testaments. The development of this interest was not primarily the

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<sup>378</sup> Madigan, Kevin. 2015. *“Medieval Christianity a New History”* Narrated by Pete Larkin, Electronic Book: Tantor Audio. Chapter 32 Part 2:30

<sup>379</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *“The Black Death”* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 68.

first outbreak of the plague but its reoccurrence, where there is often an uptake between the first and second wave. We can see the trend of praising individuals and family ties by looking at commissions of art and artwork to decorate graves and grave monuments that became more popular in the aftermath of the second wave of the plague.

The most striking individual example of the difference between the first and second wave of the plague can be found in the example of the Datini family.

### Datini Remember Me

How the plague impacted the way people wanted to be remembered can be seen in the example of Francesco di Marco Datini da Parto (c.1335- 1410). When his father died of the plague in 1348, donations were made in his name to several organisations as custom demanded, the rest was allocated to the upkeep of his children and widow. The will does not show any deliberate attempts in its construction or donations regarding long-term remembrance of the deceased. And is typical for a medieval will before 1363.<sup>380</sup> Francesco di Marco Datini survived the outbreak of the Black Death, but he was orphaned by the first wave, and he lost many family members, including several children in subsequent outbreaks.<sup>381</sup> *“Three days ago I watched two of my children die, the eldest and the middle one, in my arms, within a few hours.”*<sup>382</sup> When Marco Datini died it was stipulated in his will that 1.000 florins would be given to help found the Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence, and that most of his considerable wealth was going to be allocated into a fund for the support for orphaned and unwanted children, the fund was named the Datini Ceppo.<sup>383</sup> His will is very detailed and the donations are not spread around. Organisations are given his name and his wife had a grand fresco commemorating her husband painted outside their home, depicting him performing charitable acts.<sup>384</sup> This is a deliberate attempt to be remembered. The fresco and the donations all bring attention to a named individual showing the world outside the house that this man was a good one, worthy of their consideration when they prayed for the deceased in purgatory, and the more they prayed the faster his soul would pass through the cleansing fires. The importance of being remembered is apparent.

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<sup>380</sup> Byrne. Joseph P. 2004. *“The Black Death”* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Press. Page 169.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid. Page 137.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., Page 139.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., Page 139.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., Page 100.

## Conclusion & Summation

When studying a historical disease, the first step in the process is finding out which disease you are dealing with. The Black Death is one of, if not the most studied historical disease in human history. Hundreds of books and research papers discuss the cause behind this pandemic, and many present different theories. The advantage of studying the Black Death over other historical diseases is that it has received so much attention from so many different fields, that can reveal information not available in written records.

I concluded that the leading cause of the Black Death most likely was the Bubonic Plague, but that there might be some other infectious disease at play during the same period because of the CCR5-delta 32 mutation; revealed when the human genome was mapped in its entirety, hinting at a viral infection. As I said in chapter two, the existence of one infectious disease does not exclude the existence of another. However, the evidence is mounting that bubonic plague was the main culprit behind the Black Death, helped along by climatic changes. "The Climatic Optimum" increased the population, and then "The Little Ice Age" created a famine that weakened the population, leaving them susceptible to disease.

The number of people who died of the plague is disputed, but that reflects more the problematic nature of studying an event that happened before accurate census numbers than the estimation of lethality. We will only ever work with estimates when it comes to the population of Europe of the late medieval period; ergo, we will have to work with estimates of how many people died. However, a mortality rate between 40-60 per cent is seen by modern historians as relatively accurate across the board.

The second step I had to do was to establish a baseline for the society of the late medieval period, which meant familiarising myself with the social structure that persisted throughout most of Europe. Medieval society was hierarchical on every level. Lords, Clergy and Laity. Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. The body and the soul. God, Saints and the still living. Everything and everyone were divided into a hierarchy. It was supposed to be a stationary society, and you would reap your rewards in the afterlife. This structure was beginning to fray at the edges before the plague. It would be put under future pressure during and after the plague because, in a stationary society, you would have to defend your right to hold your station.

The second estate held an exalted position in this structure as "those who pray" their role were to safeguard the souls of the laity for the afterlife and appease God. However, it seemed that God had decided to punish them severely, and there was nothing they could do to

stop this. They were powerless in the face of the pandemic, something that wore on their already tattered reputation. To make matters worse medieval society had inherited a conception that infectious disease that showed marks upon the skin were a sign of God's displeasure.

There is much evidence that the Church and the curia had suffered a significant blow to their reputation before the advent of the plague. The rise of anticlericalism and the many reform movements predated the move to Avignon. However, the move out of the eternal city did not bode well when the Church would lose a large percentage of its best and brightest during a reoccurring pandemic. The mortality rates in the clergy were disproportionately high, but that did not necessarily endear them to the laity, as the lack of plague saints might testify. They were supposed to be holy shepherds of their communities, but they had not warned them of the coming calamity and God's wrath; they had died alongside their flock.

The consequence of the Black Death on burial traditions and testators was not first apparent in medieval Europe. It was not until the plague reoccurred in the 1360s that its cultural impacts could be seen. Now a so-called cult of remembrance" can be seen in how the number and specificity of testators and memorials changed.<sup>385</sup> Before the plague, donations on the behest of the departed were often spread out on several causes. After the plague, the donations were often given to a single of few causes, with the name of the individual and their family displayed for all to see.

It had become much more important to be remembered as an individual or select group. It seemed that in the 1360s, the fate and the anonymity of the mass graves of the 1340s still loomed large in the collective minds of the survivors.

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<sup>385</sup> See Appendix 1 and 2

# Appendix

## DIRECTIONS FROM THE GRAVE

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Table 10.  
Specified Burials

Period	Specified Graves	Burial Chapels	Monumental Sepulchers	Burial Chapel with Monuments	Burial in Ancestral Graves	Total	Proportion of Testators
<b>AREZZO</b>							
< 1276						4	0.07
1275-1300	0	3	0	1	0	9	0.10
1301-25	1	5	2	1	0	11	0.13
1326-47	1	2	4	4	0	9	0.14
1348	2	3	1	3	0	6	0.08
1349-62	1	2	1	2	0	16	0.18
1363	0	11	1	3	1	14	0.15
1364-75	2	9	0	1	2	30	0.30
1376-1400	1	12	1	2	14	99	0.15
1401-25	8	47	10	17	17		
Total							
<b>ASSISI</b>							
< 1276						1	0.04
1275-1300	0	0	0	0	1	3	0.11
1301-25	2	1	0	0	0	2	0.40
1326-47	0	0	0	1	1		
1348						5	0.17
1349-62	2	1	1	0	1	7	0.05
1363	0	2	0	0	5	18	0.06
1364-75	4	4	1	1	8		
1376-1400							
1401-25							
Total							
<b>FLORENCE</b>							
< 1276						6	0.10
1275-1300	1	2	1	1	1	11	0.15
1301-25	1	3	3	1	3	9	0.23
1326-47	1	4	0	0	4	13	0.18
1348	3	2	3	1	4	15	0.16
1349-62	1	6	3	3	2	28	0.25
1363	3	6	5	1	13	52	0.57
1364-75	2	1	3	1	45	134	0.21
1376-1400	12	24	18	8	72		
1401-25							
Total							

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<sup>386</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy.* London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page 138.

Table 10.  
Continued

Period	Specified Graves	Burial Chapels	Monumental Sepulchers	Burial Chapel with Monuments	Burial in Ancestral Graves	Total	Proportion of Testators
PERUGIA							
< 1276							
1275-1300							
1301-25	2	1	0	0	0	3	0.30
1326-47	0	1	1	0	0	2	0.03
1348	0	0	3	1	0	4	0.05
1349-62	0	1	3	0	0	4	0.20
1363	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.04
1364-75	1	4	3	0	0	8	0.16
1376-99	2	14	5	3	10	34	0.17
1400-1425	2	2	1	0	14	19	0.26
Total	7	24	16	4	24	75	0.15
PISA							
< 1276							
1275-1300							
1301-25	2	1	3	0	2	8	0.03
1326-47	1	2	2	0	4	9	0.09
1348	1	0	0	0	2	3	0.21
1349-62	2	0	3	1	4	10	0.15
1363	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.03
1364-75	1	2	2	0	4	9	0.18
1376-1400	1	2	3	0	13	19	0.17
1401-25	4	1	2	0	24	31	0.43
Total	13	8	15	1	53	90	0.12
SIENA							
< 1276							
1275-1300							
1301-25	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.02
1326-47	0	0	0	1	1	2	0.03
1348	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.02
1349-62	0	0	0	0	3	3	0.08
1363	0	0	0	0	3	3	0.13
1364-75	0	0	0	0	3	3	0.12
1376-1400	0	0	0	0	7	7	0.11
1401-25	0	2	0	0	11	13	0.29
Total	0	3	0	1	29	33	0.07

<sup>387</sup> Cohn, Samuel K, Jr. 1992. *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy.* London: The John Hopkins University Press. Page 139.



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