

Millennium issue: The Black Death

Plague and economics

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1348

THE plague reached Europe's southern ports from the Crimea, in the winter of 1347-48. The continent had enjoyed some 200 years of prosperity, and then 70 of cold. Result: too little food for too many people. By 1350 one-third of them, especially in the swollen cities, would be dead. You can be rich and die of plague; many such did. But ill-nourishment (swathes of Europe saw famine in the 1340s) surely played its part.

Just what was “the plague”? Boccaccio, who lived through it in Florence, recorded:

first, swellings in the groin or armpits, which sometimes grew as big as an egg or an apple. These spread, then changed into black or purple spots, a few large ones or many small, in any part of the body...infallible signs of approaching death.

Bubonic plague is the usual diagnosis. But the papal physician at Avignon tells of fever, spitting of blood, ulcers, but not of swellings (buboes). And bubonic plague, spread by rat fleas, is normally preceded by the death of hordes of rats (only then do the fleas opt for humans). Yet no one in 1348 recorded this.

Whatever the disease, all who visited the sick man, wrote a chronicler in Flanders,

or do business with him, or even carry him to the grave, quickly follow him there.

The result, in Florence, was that

when the graveyards were full, they dug huge trenches, where they laid the corpses hundreds at a time, stowed like merchandise in a ship...How many grand houses, once full of gentlefolk, were left empty, even of the

lowest servant...How many spirited young men and pretty women ate in the morning with their family and friends, and by evening were supping with their forefathers.

In Flanders, travellers found

fields uncultivated, cattle straying without herdsmen, barns and wine-cellars wide open, few people anywhere.

The grandees took refuge in their country houses—it was such a group whom Boccaccio imagined telling each other the tales in his “Decameron”—or hastened to promise propitiatory legacies to the church. They died anyway: England lost two archbishops, and a princess, at Bordeaux on her way to wed the prince of Castile (whose king himself was also soon to die). Of a well-off group who fled to the hills from Bergen, in what is now Norway, only one survived. But the poor took note.

Briefly, their time was to come. As demand for food slumped, so too did farm prices (though those of manufactures rose, as craftsmen died). An English chronicler recorded that in the plague year

a horse once worth 40 shillings could be bought for half a mark [one sixth as much], a fat ox for four shillings [say, a third of its earlier value], a cow for one shilling.

But wages did the opposite:

In the autumn, a reaper was not to be hired for less than eightpence [a day, 50-75% up], plus his meals. So crops were often left to rot.

It did not last: the English government swiftly brought in laws to stop the free movement of farm labour and restore pre-plague wage levels, fining employers who paid more. It half-worked. Food prices rose rapidly; in the 1350s grain cost 30% more than before. Farm wages fell, but still stayed far above past levels (unsurprisingly: not just did the attempt to reverse them defy market realities, but the levels fixed had in some places been surpassed years before the plague struck).

Craft wages and prices remained far higher in England than before. That was true in the cities of mainland Europe too; in Florence they had

doubled, a contemporary lamented. Siena's city council felt it worth offering tax breaks to attract incomers.

The surviving rich, by mere inheritance, found themselves richer still (vastly richer, the sole survivor of the Bergen group). So did the church, as gifts and legacies poured in (though in Castile it was made to return some of its gains to the donors). Yet the social shock had been great. Death was never far from medieval man. Yet here was the natural order upset, rich and poor, layman and clergy (monks especially) indiscriminately swept away by the wrath of God.

In some cities, such as Paris, the reaction to random death had been a “why bother?” collapse of morals. There and elsewhere this outlasted the plague. In Florence:

finding themselves few and rich, men forgot what had happened...and took to gluttony, taverns, gambling and unbridled lust.

The counter-reaction was a rush of piety, exemplified in a wave of church- and chantry-building. Yet the church as an institution, already under attack, emerged weakened. Had it saved the faithful? Or even its very own? One-fifth of Pope Clement VI's curia in Avignon was swept away (as was the patriarch of the Russian church).

Did the Black Death lead directly to the French peasants' revolt of 1358 or that in England of 1381, even to the Reformation? Did the shortage and high cost of labour change farming practice and push technology? (Fewer monkish copyists; use a printing press.) Was it the deaths of scholars that led to the founding of several new universities before 1400? All this has been argued; some of it may be right. The 19th-century French historian who saw the Black Death as the divide between the medieval world and the modern had, at least, a point.

In one grim respect there was no division to mark. No doubt the plague was God's judgment, but someone must be spreading it. Yes, them. By early 1348 massacres of Jews had begun, in southern France. Under trial—torture, that is—in Switzerland, a Jewish doctor (ominous words: Stalin was to use them, in the same spirit) confessed to poisoning the local wells. In Basle, Jews were burnt to death; then in Stuttgart, Freiburg, Dresden, Mainz, Cologne and many another German city; in Strasbourg, even before

the plague arrived; in Brussels too and even in one or two cities of relatively tolerant Spain.

Most rulers and a few city councils did a little to protect Jews; Pope Clement threatened to excommunicate their persecutors. The Christian mobs, egged on by the bizarre self-flagellant cults that had sprung up, were not listening. In the proportion of people it killed, the Black Death was Europe's greatest known disaster; for one group of Europeans, 600 years later worse was to come.