THE GREAT COURSES®

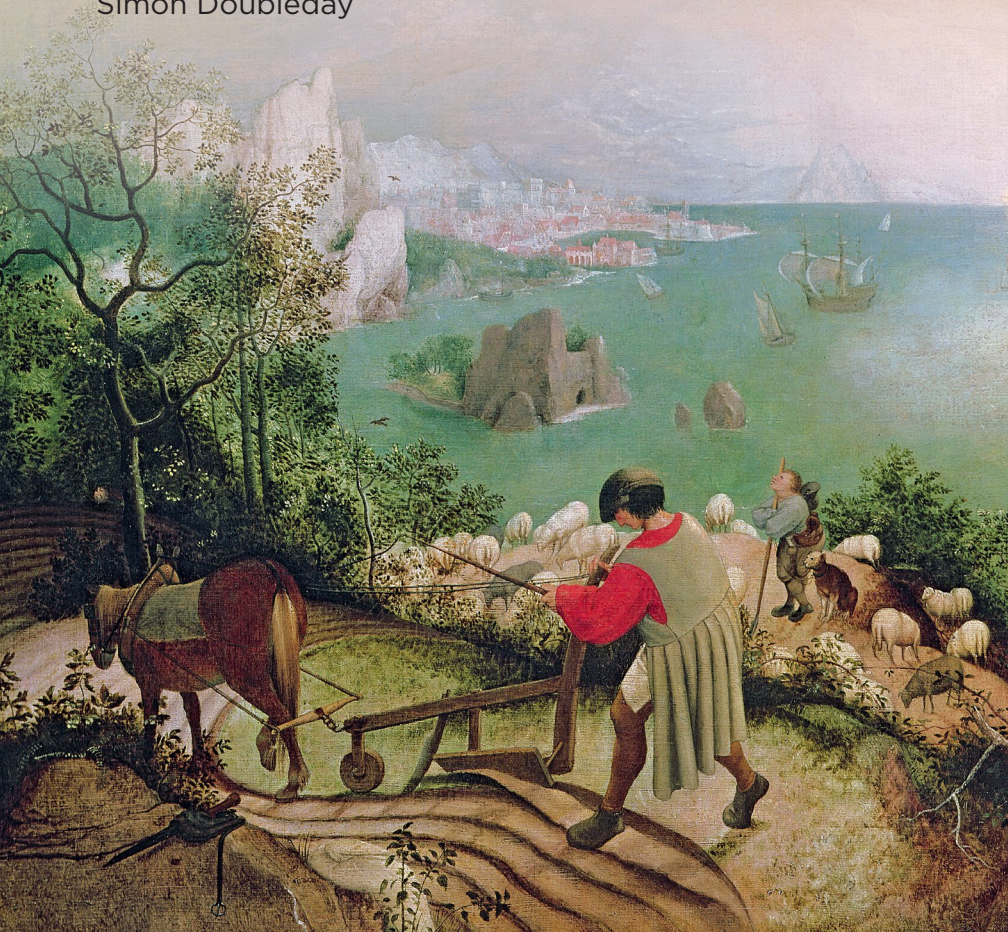
Topic
History

Subtopic
Civilization & Culture

After the Plague

Course Guidebook

Simon Doubleday



THE GREAT COURSES®

LEADERSHIP

President & CEO	PAUL SUIJK
Chief Financial Officer	BRUCE G. WILLIS
Chief Marketing Officer	CALE PRITCHETT
SVP, Marketing	JOSEPH PECKL
SVP, Content Development	JASON SMIGEL
VP, Customer Engagement	KONSTANTINE GELFOND
VP, Technology Services	MARK LEONARD
VP, General Counsel	DEBRA STORMS
VP, People	AUDREY WILLIAMS
Sr. Director, Creative & Production	KEVIN BARNHILL
Sr. Director, Content Development	KEVIN MANZEL
Director, Business Operations & Planning	GAIL GLEESON
Director, Editorial & Design Services	FARHAD HOSSAIN
Director, Content Research & Alternative Programming	WILLIAM SCHMIDT
Director, Creative	OCTAVIA VANNALL

PRODUCTION

Studio Operations Manager	JIM M. ALLEN
Video Production Director	ROBERTO DE MORAES
Technical Engineering Manager	SAL RODRIGUEZ
Quality Assurance Supervisor	JAMIE MCCOMBER
Sr. Post-Production Manager	PETER DWYER
Production Manager	RIMA KHALEK
Producer	DEREK KNIGHT
Post-Production Producer	JAMES BLANDFORD
Content Developer	SUSAN LUTZ
Associate Producer	MASHA STOYANOVA
Graphics Manager	JAMES NIDEL
Graphic Artist	KATHERINE STEINBAUER
Editing Manager	OWEN YOUNG
Editors	RYAN FINNEGAN ART JARUPHAIBOON
Assistant Editor	CHARLES GRAHAM
Audio Engineer	GORDON HALL IV
Camera Operator	RICK FLOWE
Production Assistant	PAUL SHEEHAN

EDITORIAL & DESIGN

Sr. Writer/Editor	MARTIN STEGER
Graphic Designer	RHOCHELLE MUNSAYAC
Editorial Associates	MARGI WILHELM MOLLY LEVY
Editorial Assistant	WILLIAM DOMANSKI

Simon Doubleday

Simon Doubleday is a Professor of History at Hofstra University. He received his BA in History from the University of Cambridge, where he completed a special program of study on the Black Death and its aftermath, and his PhD in Medieval History from Harvard University. He is a specialist in the history of medieval Europe, especially Spain.

Simon has received multiple grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship. He has also been a fellow of the New York Public Library's Frederick Lewis Allen Room, and he was elected a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He is a former president of the American Academy of Research Historians of Medieval Spain. He participates regularly in leading medieval conferences and has been an invited lecturer at universities in England, Spain, Portugal, France, and the United States.

Simon's books include *The Wise King: A Christian Prince, Muslim Spain, and the Birth of the Renaissance* and *The Lara Family: Crown and Nobility in Medieval Spain*. He has coedited a number of books, including *Why the Middle Ages Matter: Medieval Light on Modern Injustice*; *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West, and the Relevance of the Past*; and *Border Interrogations: Questioning Spanish Frontiers*. He was also the founding editor of the *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Guides

Supplementary Material

After the Plague

The Black Death, which arrived in Europe in 1347, was one of the greatest natural disasters ever to afflict humanity. New scientific research suggests that the plague first began to spread in central Asia a century earlier. When it exploded in the middle of the 14th century, it affected much of the world, including Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. Mortality rates were much higher than the traditional figure of one-third.

In this course, you'll learn that the Black Death did not result in a catastrophic crisis of civilization. Focusing on Europe between 1350–1400, the course shows that people met the challenge with extraordinary resilience. This was a characteristic that medieval society had developed through long experience with famines, floods, and earthquakes. It now resulted in proactive, practical responses to the plague as well as vibrant cultural responses.

No place escaped the Black Death, and so this course explores the complex social and emotional processes that followed the traumatic loss of children and other family members. Yet much of the continent rose from the ashes of the terrible plague, even as it continued to be devastated by later waves.

The course traces medieval resilience in the face of the Black Death across many areas of life, including literature and the arts, the economy, spiritual life, and the search for social justice. In all these areas, the late 14th century was a dynamic and creative period, even if it is not quite true to say that the plague led to the Renaissance, which had already begun. Medieval globalization, which had laid Europe open to the spread of plague, now facilitated its long-term recovery.

In these lectures, one of the learner's companions will be the well-traveled and cosmopolitan English writer Geoffrey Chaucer. He was about six years old when the plague first struck; thus, you will meet him first as a young child. Then you will trace his social ascent, first as a page in the service of a powerful noble family and later as a royal appointee in the customs house in London. His work, his travels, and his literary masterpiece *The Canterbury Tales* allow us exceptional insight into the lived experience of ordinary men and women.

Challenging stereotypes about the Middle Ages, two lectures examine medicine and public health, suggesting that this was a more intellectually sophisticated society than often imagined. It could take measures that might have even, in some cases, been effective in limiting the impact of plague. Rather than encountering a passive or invariably morbid culture, you will encounter a world that loved laughter and joy, qualities that abound in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Some people—including many women and the poor—were disadvantaged, yet women of most social levels (from queens to country farmwives) exerted agency and authority. While the formal justice system served the interests of the rich, ordinary Englishmen could dream of real justice: a dream that pulsated through contemporary stories of the outlaw Robin Hood. They could also dream of foreign lands, as in Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, and rethink their own world in the process.

One realm of rethinking was religion. The course examines the growing emphasis on personal forms of Christian belief and the reactivation of apocalyptic ideas. Since medieval Europe was not exclusively Christian, the course also examines the experiences of other religious groups. It looks, for example, at the plague in the Islamic world, which included Al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain. Another subject is the plague in Jewish communities. The experience for many Jews—especially in the Rhineland and elsewhere in central Europe—was indeed catastrophic, as they faced genocidal persecution. Yet even under these circumstances, these communities often demonstrated profound cultural resilience.

The course then turns to the search for social justice, first in Rome and later in France and England, where rebellion exploded in 1381. The authoritarian king of England, Richard II, developed a luxurious court culture, critiqued in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The government repressed new heretical movements, afraid that they would feed further social unrest. Meanwhile, impassioned mystics continued to seek a new relationship with the divine.

In the penultimate lecture, Chaucer wrestles with the specter of death in his *Canterbury Tales*, even as he approaches his own. Finally, the course looks at how in art, film, and literature, modern creative artists have found a sense of kinship with this remarkable period of history, which continues to speak powerfully to us across the centuries.

Resilience: Rethinking the Black Death

Research is showing that the Black Death was greater in magnitude than we normally imagine. Despite the devastation of the catastrophe and many subsequent waves of disease, people did not simply surrender to gloom and despair. Those people who survived the first wave of plague, and those who were born in the decades that followed, adapted in the face of trauma and attempted to rebuild their worlds.

What Was the Plague?

- The beginning of the European experience of the Black Death occurred in October 1347. That was when terror first reached the Sicilian port city of Messina. According to one chronicler, a strange new disease had been carried to Sicily on galleys from Genoa, and it was extremely contagious.

- What exactly was this disease? In a scientific sense, the answer remained something of a mystery for more than 500 years. It was a young French doctor named Alexandre Yersin, working in Hong Kong, who in 1894 identified the bacillus that causes plague. It came to be known as *Yersinia pestis*.

- Scientific research has now established beyond doubt that it was indeed *Yersinia pestis* that was responsible for the plague. The disease is transmitted in at least three modes: bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic. The newest work suggests a fourth mode of transmission: gastrointestinal plague. In this form, plague is contracted by consuming infected meat.

- In the decades before 1347, the plague had already made its way west and east from its likely point of origin in the Tibetan Plateau in central Asia. It had been diffused along the vast web of networks that linked the Chinese empire to the Mediterranean, conventionally known as the Silk Road, and may also have spread across the Indian Ocean.

- Over the following several years, it would continue to spread. In a matter of years, it would kill roughly 40%–50% of the population of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, with only minor variations. Plague became endemic in the ecosystem of these regions and would remain so at least until the 19th century.

Society's Resilience

- The response to this disease was not, as we might expect, a descent into absolute despair, economic depression, or cultural morbidity. Instead, the resilience of people stands out. Here, the word *resilience* means several things:

  - First, ordinary people have the ability to find meaning and direction in the face of crisis.

  - Second, we can find resilience in literary and artistic production.

  - Third, the economic resilience of this society also deserves closer attention.

Geoffrey Chaucer

- A notable figure alive during the plague was the writer Geoffrey Chaucer, who was quite young at the start of matters. During the first wave of the pandemic, his dying uncle, Thomas, had left a number of properties in London to Geoffrey's father, John. The Chaucer family—like many others—found some financial benefit in the wake of tragedy and trauma.

- Geoffrey's parents, flush with new money, had high hopes for their talented son. When Geoffrey was about 14 or 15, his parents pulled off a small coup, managing to place him as a page boy in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, the countess of Ulster. In a flash, young Geoffrey had been whisked from his previous world of trade, coins, and grammar school into a new, courtly sphere.

- Geoffrey may have met his future wife here. Her name was Philippa, and she was born into a class above Geoffrey's family: a well-connected, French-speaking noble family.

- In 1359, still aged no more than 17, Geoffrey was required to accompany his lord, Lionel of Antwerp, on a military campaign against the French. It was during the messy siege of Reims, in northern France, that he was captured and briefly held for ransom in the spring of 1360. The experience permanently colored his view of war, which he saw as an unglamorous business.

Chaucer's Changing Fortunes

- One year later, in 1361, a second terrible wave of plague lasting two years passed through England, killing perhaps an additional 10% of the population. Geoffrey was now approaching adulthood, and soon afterward may have entered the service of Edward, the Black Prince—brother of Lionel and the eldest of King Edward III's surviving sons.

- In the middle of the decade, he traveled even farther afield, to the Spanish kingdom of Navarre, perhaps as a messenger on a diplomatic mission for the Black Prince. The year of his journey, 1366, also witnessed his marriage to Philippa. Their marriage brought him access to Philippa's elite social networks. Two years later, these networks looked as if they were about to pay off in a very big way.

- In 1368, Blanche, the young wife of John of Gaunt, suddenly passed away. John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, was one of the most powerful landowners in the kingdom; he was the third of Edward III's sons, and younger brother of the Black Prince and Lionel of Antwerp, who had been Geoffrey's lord.

- Blanche may well have passed away from plague, as 1368 was another plague year. Following the massive outbreak in 1361, it marked the third great wave of the disease in England. Blanche's sister and father had probably also died of the plague.

- At this juncture, Geoffrey Chaucer's ambitious new sister-in-law Katherine moved in as the governess for the children that poor Blanche had left. It was not long before John of Gaunt turned his eyes to the governess.

- Within a few years, and probably sooner, he and Katherine had become lovers—despite the somewhat inconvenient fact that she was married. (This obstacle would soon be removed by the duke's decision to put Katherine's husband on the front lines of battle against the French, where, unsurprisingly, he was killed.)

- Young Geoffrey Chaucer now faced the prospect of dizzying new connections to the house of Lancaster. It was in this context that Chaucer wrote the earliest of his major poems, which was entitled *Book of the Duchess*. He wrote this compelling work in 1369, about one year after Blanche's death.

Encapsulating a Generation

- The poem was, on one level, an attempt to ingratiate himself with the widowed duke, John of Gaunt, by consoling him in his grief. On a deeper level, however, it also presents all of Chaucer's readers, including us, with a means of processing tragedy, trauma, and despair.

- In *Book of the Duchess*, a key moment occurs when the narrator is in a dream. He comes to encounter a knight in black who is lamenting the loss of his love.

- The knight bewails the cruelty of death, who has taken his beloved away. Her name was White, he says—almost certainly a play on the name of Blanche, which means "white" in French.

- The knight unburdens himself through language and confession. The lady had first denied him her love, but a year later, she granted him her ring. They had lived many a year together as a couple. The narrator asks him, rather densely, "Where is she now?"

- "She is dead," the knight states. For many critics, this admission—mundane and straightforward—marks the point at which the knight comes to terms with his trauma. Eventually, a bell rings, and the dreamer awakes, his book still in his hand.

- *Book of the Duchess* is a work that feels its way tentatively toward healing. It reflects a general spirit of resilience in the face of suffering, and it is a homage to the power of words as a source of healing.

- *Book of the Duchess* encapsulates the spirit of the generations after the plague: life-affirming, even in the shadow of death. The plague did not give rise to the Renaissance, but it would shape the vibrant intellectual and spiritual culture of late medieval Europe.

✶ The Black Death was a profound shock. It was followed by centuries of devastating aftershocks, as new waves of plague swept over the continent. But by revisiting the art of this period, reencountering its literature, learning about its history, and coming to understand its economic recovery and extraordinary resilience, we may find inspiration and even healing in our own times.

Reading

Green, "The Four Black Deaths."
Horrox, *The Black Death*.
Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*.

Questions

1 True or false? The plague gave rise to the Renaissance.

2 Chaucer's earliest major poem, which provides evidence for the resilience of 14th-century culture in the face of human tragedy, had which of these titles?

a *Book of the Princess*
b *Book of the Duchess*
c *Book of the Countess*
d *Book of the Empress*

Answers: 1 False; 2 b

Medieval Globalization and the Black Death

By the 1340s, Europe was highly mobile and interconnected. Trade and warfare allowed familiarity with far-flung places. Medieval globalization had three important consequences relevant to the plague. First, it meant that Europe on the eve of the plague was already vibrant in commercial and artistic terms. Second, and tragically, it laid Europe open to the same pandemic diseases which were devastating many other parts of the world. Third, in the long term, the very same vibrant energy facilitated an economic and cultural rebound after the first terrible waves of plague.

Commercial and Artistic Vibrancy

- An expansion of global trade in the century before the Black Death had helped to invigorate European economies. The English traded their wool to textile production centers in Flanders, while Italian towns like Florence, Genoa, and Venice forged new commercial relationships along

the North African and eastern Mediterranean coasts. These towns were embedded in long-distance trade networks that oriented them, quite literally, to Asia in the East.

Chaucer's Early Experiences

On the eve of the plague, London was fast becoming an important cosmopolitan hub in the global economy. The writer Geoffrey Chaucer grew up in London, just a stone's throw away from the river where ships came in from France, Spain, the Baltic Sea, and the Mediterranean. On the streets, Chaucer would have heard the languages of Flemish, Italian, and Scandinavian merchants mingling with English.

- By the time the plague arrived, the commercial development of Florence and other urban centers had already begun to stimulate the revitalization of the visual arts sometimes called the Renaissance. In his book *The Lives of the Artists*, the art historian Giorgio Vasari suggested that one man, above all, had been responsible for this rebirth: Giotto. According to Vasari, Giotto was a self-taught artist and a unique talent.

- Vasari describes the astonishing frescoes that Giotto produced at churches such as Santa Croce in Florence, the city of his birth, and in other towns in northern Italy. One of the very few works by Giotto which Vasari does not describe is one of the most spectacular: the Arena Chapel in Padua, which he had painted around the year 1305.

  - The chapel's deep color blue leaps out. It is an ultramarine made from lapis lazuli, a mineral that can only be found in northeastern Afghanistan, imported via Venice and Constantinople.

  - The blues of Giotto's work are a reminder that Europe was already enmeshed in global networks—networks that also brought lethal danger.

Global Transmission

- The Black Death was transmitted by virtue of medieval globalization. The devastation it wrought in Europe reflected the continent's embeddedness in processes that affected the whole of the known world.

- Scholars now think that the Black Death had a major impact across most of the Eurasian landmass and much of Africa, sparing only the Americas and Australasia. The Americas escaped because, as the historian of medicine Monica Green has explained, these areas had not been integrated into Eurasian and African trade networks.

- Current research suggests we should locate the origins of the pandemic not in the late 1340s, when it first arrived in Mediterranean Europe, but at least a century earlier. It was probably in the early 13th century that a so-called big bang occurred in the evolutionary history of the ancient plague bacterium.

- Multiple new strains of the disease suddenly began to proliferate somewhere in the vast Tibetan Plateau. The reasons for this explosion are unclear, but there may have been a combination of climatic and human factors at play.

- One factor may have been the expansion of the Mongol empire into the regions immediately to the north of the Tibetan Plateau. In the very early 13th century, Chinese sources began recording new and deadly epidemics and associated them with the actions of the Mongol armies.

- In Chinese medical texts of this period, a new symptom is described: a large and virulent sore, often described as black, red, purple, and pus-bearing. During the later 13th century, the Mongol armies probably expanded the reach of the disease across China and central Asia.

- There is no evidence that any Europeans contracted the plague at this early stage, despite increasing contact with the Mongol empire. But plague may have been present during the Mongol siege of Baghdad in 1258.

- *Yersinia pestis* then followed the mountain passes, rivers, and valleys often called the Silk Road. Historians also think we should consider the Indian Ocean as a transmission route.

  - There had been two major epidemics in 1333 and 1344 in several cities on the southeast coast of China, where offices of maritime affairs had been established to encourage trade with the south seas.

  - The plague may then have been transmitted across the Indian Ocean to eastern Africa and the Persian Gulf.

  - Although archaeological research on the impact of the plague in eastern Africa is still very much in its infancy, several trading centers on the coasts of Kenya and Tanzania seem to have suffered abandonment or at least major decline, as did the spectacular city of Great Zimbabwe.

- Either by the Indian Ocean route—via the Red Sea—or more plausibly via the Black Sea, the plague arrived in Egypt in late 1347. This would prove the start of a period of decline for Egypt, which had experienced a golden age since the end of the 12th century.

- The Black Death led to massive depopulation across Egypt. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, the Black Death was the final nail in the coffin for a series of great Berber empires.

The Plague Comes to Europe

- This lecture has so far followed the story of the global transmission of plague to the doorsteps of Europe. But how exactly did the pandemic cross the threshold? One route was probably the Black Sea.

- By the 1340s, the Mongol state known as the Golden Horde had colonized the shores of the Black Sea, a vital point of access to the Silk Road. In the summer of 1346, plague reached their regional capital in the Crimean Peninsula.

- The Golden Horde had begun to attack Italian colonies and communities in the region, and only the Genoese colony at Caffa—on the coast of Crimea—had survived. Caffa was an extremely important source of grain, slaves, and fish for the Italian market, but it was now imperiled.

- The chronicler Gabriele de Mussis left a description of what happened next:

> See how the heathen Tartar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly besieged the city of Caffa. ... But behold, the whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tartars and killed thousands upon thousands every day. It was as though arrows were raining down from heaven to strike and crush the Tartars' arrogance.

- The Tartars, says de Mussis, "died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies." These signs included "swellings in the armpit or groin … followed by a putrid fever." They then ordered corpses to be placed in catapults, he says, and lobbed into the city. The Christians, according to his account, soon fell foul to this biological warfare, and, sailing back to Italy, carried the disease with them.

- This account has left a deep impression on many modern historians, but caution is warranted. It is likely that the Black Sea was indeed a fundamental route for the transmission of the plague. However, as the historian Hannah Barker has observed, there are several problems with the account.

  - First, Gabriele de Mussis never left his city of Piacenza during the plague. He was simply relying on hearsay.

  - Second, there is no evidence that plague can be transmitted from the bodies of the dead to the bodies of the living, or even that medieval people believed that it could be, so this kind of biological warfare would have made no sense.

  - Finally, the supposed behavior of the Mongol army would have violated their traditional funeral rites.

- There is no doubt that the Mongols were indeed suffering from plague. A petition from the Genoese people of Caffa to the doge of Genoa, dating from February or March 1347, refers to a pestilence that had completely decimated the Mongol army, but it does not mention any infections among the Genoese inhabitants of the city itself.

- The Genoese were busy requesting military reinforcements as well as a bishop. The city would hold out against the Mongol threat.

- As Barker proposes, it is quite likely that the plague was simply transmitted from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean once the massive grain trade had resumed in the summer of 1347. By November of that

year, the grain ships from Caffa and the black rats that came aboard reached Genoa itself, where there seems to have been almost instant interpersonal transmission of the plague.

✶ It was the combination of warfare and trade that proved so lethal. Global interconnectedness was clearly a double-edged sword. But by the same token, it would also prove, in time, to be a key to the recovery of Europe.

Reading

Green, "Taking 'Pandemic' Seriously."
Hymes, "Epilogue."
Keene, ed., *Toward a Global Middle Ages*.

Questions

1 The lapis lazuli that the Italian painter Giotto used to create the dark blues of the Arena Chapel in Padua came from which country?

a Mali
b China
c Russia
d Afghanistan

2 True or false? Historians now think that the initial big bang in the evolution of the disease occurred in the 13th century and was spread by the Mongol army.

Answers: **1** d; **2** True

Death Ships: The Spread of Plague in Europe

If 14th-century Europe was a tapestry, it was woven together by ships, boats, and sea and river routes. It was these same interconnected routes that would prove to be the paths by which plague would spread across the continent. Maritime and river trade brought devastating plague to England and the great realms of the Iberian Peninsula: Castile, Aragon, Portugal, and Granada. Yet across much of western Europe, it also facilitated a dramatic economic rebound in the generations after the plague.

The Plague Arrives in England

- In England, it was in the tiny port of Melcombe, near Weymouth, that the plague first arrived. A Franciscan chronicler tells us that in 1348,

> two ships landed at Melcombe in Dorset a little before Midsummer. In them were sailors from [Bordeaux] who were infected with an unheard-of pestilence.

- Another account adds that it then "killed innumerable people" before going on "to Bristol, where very few were left alive." The plague, we read, moved north and eventually claimed "a fifth of the men, women, and children."

- Regarding how much of the population the plague killed, that estimate of a fifth is very much on the low side. Most historians agree that even the traditional figure of one-third, which used to appear in textbooks, is an underestimate.

- At the other end of the scale, several English chroniclers state that "scarcely a tenth of mankind was left alive," implying 90% mortality. This is likely a stock phrase expressing trauma and shock, without being statistically reliable.

- Recent calculations suggest that an accurate estimate of the overall mortality rate would be at least 40% in the first great wave of plague from 1348–1351, with 50% and above in some specific areas, including Florence. The disease became endemic in the population.

- Later outbreaks (such as those that occurred in 1361–1362 and 1368) often killed upward of 5%–10% of the population. Although the plague disappeared from western Europe in the early 18th century, it continued to menace the south and east of the continent. It devastated North Africa and both the Russian and Ottoman Empires into the 19th century and beyond.

The Pattern of the Spread

- The original spread of the plague in Europe is usually depicted as a sequence of expanding lines, washing slowly across the continent in orderly waves between 1347 and 1351. However, it makes better sense to imagine arrows of infection shooting outward almost simultaneously from a variety of ports on the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea.

- From these coastal ports, the disease was then borne inland by a variety of vectors. Among the vectors were rodents, animal fleas, human fleas, humans themselves, and perhaps birds. It was then diffused from other major urban centers, like Florence.

- Some historians have suggested that the far north of Europe, benefiting from relative isolation and colder climatic conditions, may have been hit less hard than the highly networked commercial centers of the Mediterranean. There may be some truth to this.

  - Cold temperatures in the north of Scotland may have limited the spread of plague; they may only have been warm enough to support a rat population during the summer months.

  - At first, the Scots sensed an advantage. One chronicler relates that, hearing of the cruel plague among the English, they glimpsed an opportunity to invade their hated old enemy south of the border.

  - However, this did not last long. As they gathered near the border to prepare an invasion, "a fierce mortality came upon them, and the sudden cruelty of a monstrous death winnowed the Scots."

- The plague also decimated Scandinavia. Additionally, it eventually reached Bohemia, in the modern Czech Republic. The chronicler Francis of Prague suggested that the Black Death—having caused massive suffering in neighboring Austria—had miraculously spared Bohemia in 1348. But this same chronicler acknowledges that the disease also struck in Bohemia a couple of years later, in 1350. In short, nowhere on the European continent was saved.

Spain

- It used to be argued that—perhaps because of its relatively dry climate—Spain was less hard-hit than other parts of western Europe. However, the various Christian kingdoms in this region—Castile, Navarre, and Aragon, along with the neighboring realm of Portugal—were impacted in various ways.

- Plague eventually spread throughout the entire Iberian Peninsula. The movement of pilgrims and royal courts accelerated this diffusion. There were probably multiple simultaneous points of entry into the peninsula.

- We know the plague had arrived in the northeast, in the border counties of Catalonia, by April 1348. The king of Aragon wrote to the governor of the beautiful Mediterranean island of Mallorca, warning him of the danger. But by this stage, it was too late.

- The plague had an appalling impact on Jewish communities in Spain, both directly and because of the religious violence that it provoked. It reached Barcelona by mid-May 1348, sparking anti-Semitic attacks in the Jewish quarter and in neighboring towns.

- From port cities and towns across the peninsula, the plague spread with frightening speed. Coastal regions were probably hit harder than landlocked areas, but evidence from Jewish graves suggests that even places like Toledo, in the dead center of the peninsula, were afflicted terribly.

- Across the plains of Castile, there was a major economic shift toward pastoral farming, which did not require much manpower, and in particular the merino wool sector. For Navarre, a kingdom nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees, some scholars have proposed a figure as high as a 50% death rate.

- Navarre was a common point of entry for travelers and merchants as well as messengers, riding across the mountains to and from France. Also present were pilgrims riding and walking to Santiago. Soldiers crisscrossed the high peaks to participate in both theaters of fighting in the Hundred Years' War, France and Spain, and helped to spread disease with them as they marched.

- Damage was also high in Catalonia, which was embedded in networks of Mediterranean trade. Historians have pointed to a long-term decline in Catalan commerce in the late 14th and 15th centuries.

- Barcelona, which may have had a population of around 38,000 in the early 1380s, had only around 20,000 residents in the middle of the next century. There was a great shortage of laborers across the region, bringing higher wages for some workers but trouble for others. Up in the mountains, financially squeezed landlords began to impose harsher conditions on their peasants.

The Rebound

- Rebounding economic activity showed up in the aftermath of the devastation. In the practical world of trade, commerce, and sailing, survivors were rebuilding their worlds surprisingly quickly—and they were soon to discover new ones.

- From the little port of Dartmouth and bigger cities like Southampton and London, English shipmen were soon plying the rough seas of the Bay of Biscay once again. Within a century, the coasts of Portugal would become the point of departure for the earliest global European empire.

- Portuguese mariners navigated their way down the West African coast, often acting in conjunction with merchants from Venice, Genoa, and Florence, bringing back gold, cloth, and slaves. They sailed into the Indian Ocean, too, where they latched onto vast, preexisting networks of trade. Lisbon was destined to be a center of colonial trade—and exploitation.

- The success of these Portuguese ventures would galvanize Columbus to set sail in 1492, from the little Spanish port of Palos de la Frontera. That, in turn, initiated a sequence of voyages that would transport culture and disease across the Atlantic.

- By the 16th century, Seville, a Muslim city on the Guadalquivir, would become the greatest commercial metropolis in the whole of Europe. The benefits of this new wealth were unevenly shared: There was poverty as well as prosperity. But the rebound from the plague, which remained endemic in Spain and in Europe, was apparent.

Reading

Childs, "The Shipman."
Doubleday, *The Wise King*.
Varlik, "New Science and Old Sources."

Questions

1 True or false? The Black Death of 1348–1351 caused a mortality rate of at least 40%, reaching 50% and above in some areas.

2 True or false? Some regions—including Bohemia, Scandinavia, and Spain—escaped the plague almost entirely.

Answers: 1 True; **2** False

Children, Plague, and Grief

This lecture looks at medieval European attitudes toward children, finding that parents were deeply invested in the well-being of the young. It also looks at what happened when the plague seized generations of children, and it concludes by asking how people in the towns and villages of 14th-century Europe wrestled with the very practical question of how to handle entire generations of orphans.

Medieval European Attitudes toward Children

- In the premodern world, child mortality was always extremely high. Perhaps between 30% and 50% of children would not live to the age of 12. Dangers included harmful bacteria and malnutrition.

- It used to be thought that because of these high mortality rates, parents could not afford to become too emotionally attached to their children. However, historians now believe that medieval parents were just as invested in the well-being of their offspring as people are in the present. It's probably a primal biological impulse among all primates.

- In medieval culture, childhood lasted until about the age of 12 (for girls) or 14 (for boys). Children were seen as being soft, tender, and malleable. This view reflects a generalized affection for children, though it also meant that children's emotions were seen as fleeting and changeable—not to be taken too seriously.

- Children on the eve of the Black Death, just like today's children, often played with toys. There were rag dolls and metal toys. In the countryside, the children of peasant families might have played with flutes, whistles, or noise-making rattles.

- For wealthier children, there would have been fancier options, including model knights on horseback. And for the children of royalty, there were some truly spectacular handmade models. For instance, as a six-year-old, Prince Edward of Caernarfon, later Edward II of England, received a toy castle which had been made by his personal cook.

- By the end of the Middle Ages, some toys were being produced commercially, but usually children made their own toys, including dolls, horses, ships, spears, and swords. Older children would have played board games, like backgammon, chess, and dice. Medieval children also played plenty of outdoor games.

- The assumption that medieval children had to work from a very young age, especially in the countryside, has been exaggerated. Additionally, many of them had some kind of education. Some were taught at home, while others would have gone to school.

- Still, we should not romanticize medieval childhood. School discipline could be brutal. As in our own age, there is evidence of parental abuse, too.

- Overall, medieval people believed that children should cherish their parents and be obedient to them. Parents, in turn, were expected to raise their children with love and affection as well as with firm discipline.

Traumatic Losses

- To lose a child was deeply traumatic in the Middle Ages. In theory, bereaved parents were supposed to be stoic. But in reality, they were often left in shock, denial, and pain. Bereaved mothers may well have empathized with images and sculptures showing the suffering of Mary after the crucifixion of Christ.

- The suffering would often have been equally acute for fathers, although they were supposed to repress their grief. We read of fathers wailing, collapsing, and falling asleep from emotional exhaustion; one man committed suicide.

- It stretches the very limits of imagination to envisage the pain of an entire generation of mothers and fathers who lost their children in the first great plague pandemic. The agony would have swept across even the smallest rural communities.

- On one manor, 34 out of 47 landless males were killed. Among them were at least two 12-year-old boys and three 14-year-old boys. And some small infants in the countryside would have been killed indirectly because of the deaths of their mothers.

Abraham and Isaac

There is no story that reveals the value of a child's life more than the biblical tale of Abraham and Isaac, which describes Abraham's terrified belief that he must sacrifice his own son to the Almighty. No story presents us with a more shocking test of faith. The story circulated widely in medieval Europe.

- The mortality rate among children was just as high as it was among adults in the first outbreak. In later outbreaks, it was worse. Chroniclers claimed that the second great wave, which took place between 1361 and 1362, had a more severe impact on children, and statistics prove them right.

- Records in Siena, for instance, show that by 1374, the proportion of child deaths among all plague deaths had risen to 50%. A chronicler from Pisa recorded that four out of every five plague deaths that year were among

those aged 12 or younger. Returning to Siena, an astronomical 88% of plague deaths in the fourth wave (in 1383) were children. Only at the very end of the century did the numbers begin to fall.

Pearl

Pearl is the name of a notable Middle English poem. Its poet, who lived in northern England, expresses intense personal grief at the loss of a very young daughter—a "precious pearl without a spot"—who has died before reaching the age of two. The poem never mentions the plague explicitly. English writers never did so in this period, but the plague's shadow is everywhere.

The Death of Parents

- Between the Black Death and the end of the 15th century, in one in every five families, at least one parent died before the heir was 12. Children would have been exposed to the grief of the surviving parent, too.

- Many children came to be raised by a second wife, and the theme of the so-called wicked stepmother came to be a common trope in folklore. Most of these women undoubtedly treated the children well, but the exceptions are the ones who surface in the court records. The remarriage of mothers could also cause problems if the result was a dysfunctional family.

- We can imagine a traumatized generation of children with intense, unstable emotional lives. These emotions would have been aggravated by instability in the world around them, with events like a failed harvest, a war, or the deposition of a king. Many acted up or played out the violence that surrounded them in the games that they played.

- The death of parents also raised extremely practical problems. In many cases, children had been left as the heirs to their parents' estates. This could lead to very young children inheriting property.

- Sometimes parents would have realized the urgent need to make final arrangements as they lay dying of plague; sometimes the disease would have overtaken them too quickly. In either case, the community needed to appoint a guardian.

- Usually, this was one of the closest living relatives of the child, or if necessary, a kindly neighbor. Guardians were reminded that the children entrusted to them—their wards—should be clothed and fed properly.

- But in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death, when demand for land dropped, it was not always easy to find guardians. There were incentives for people willing to assume responsibility, with examples being the grant of some land, the waiving of fees for assuming guardianship, and so forth. Meanwhile, in London, the authorities took painstaking care to ensure the welfare of young orphans, particularly those with substantial inheritances.

Conclusion

- On both the individual and the collective level, medieval people showed immense endurance in the face of the plague. Nothing erased the grief.

✶ It would be foolish for us, centuries later, to try to find progress narratives—a renaissance—among the waves of deaths families endured. However, we can empathize. We can acknowledge the bravery, resourcefulness, and compassion with which they faced an almost unimaginable scale of grief.

Reading

Finucane, *The Rescue of the Innocents*.
Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*.
Orme, *Medieval Children*.
Pearl.

Questions

1 Which biblical story, widely retold in medieval Europe, reveals the value placed on the lives of children in the premodern period?

a Abraham and Isaac

b The flood

c The expulsion from Eden

d The tower of Babel

2 Which poem from 14th-century England is a reflection on the death of the poet's young daughter, possibly from the plague?

a *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

b *Pearl*

c *Piers Plowman*

Answers: 1 a; 2 b

Famine, Flood, and Earthquakes

This lecture looks at how even before the plague, people had made the best in the face of disasters. Specially, the lecture examines their responses to three kinds of disaster—famine, flood, and earthquakes—that had primed this society for the greatest catastrophe of all.

Famine

- Hunger was already endemic on the eve of the Black Death. In the century before the plague, there had been a sharp downturn in the climate across the Northern Hemisphere. In 1257, the largest volcanic eruption in the last 7,000 years took place on an island in Indonesia. The eruption generated a dark volcanic veil of ash, ensuring two of the coldest, wettest summers of the whole millennium and creating the conditions for famine.

- The effects of El Niño, a climate pattern in the eastern Pacific, also meant a long-term destabilization of the weather. It brought wetter conditions across much of Europe and North Africa, and it caused much colder weather in northern Europe in particular.

- The culmination of these trends was the Great Famine of 1315–1321, the worst in European history. The famine was compounded by one of the greatest disasters to have afflicted medieval Europe in the generations before the Black Death: the great cattle plague.

- This plague, like the more famous pandemic to come, was also a global event. The disease—probably rinderpest—had spread from central and eastern Asia, reaching central Europe by 1316. By 1318, it had struck cattle herds in France and the Low Countries. It appeared in England around Easter the following year, killing roughly two-thirds of the cattle in less than a year.

- There would be further cattle plague outbreaks in the 1320s and 1330s. This was a devastating blow for lords and peasants alike. These epidemics crippled local economies and led millions of Europeans further into starvation.

Troilus and Criseyde

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is the story of the ill-fated, passionate romance between Troilus (the son of the king of Troy) and Criseyde, a beautiful young widow. The lovesick Troilus displays self-absorbed, paralyzing misery, but his sensible friend Pandarus, who is also Criseyde's uncle, has a more constructive approach: He advises action, positivity, and resilience.

- Medieval communities attempted to survive these disasters in various ways. Natural disasters and epidemic disease were quite often perceived as divine punishment for the sins of man, but there were ways of mitigating this.

- During periods of crisis such as the famine year of 1315, the English clergy led barefoot processions. Priests said masses and prayers in the hope of warding off animal disease, and the use of amulets was widespread among peasants and kings alike. People called on the protection of the saints to deal with weather-related problems, including drought as well as famine.

- England also saw people set up collective insurance against damage. Rural fraternities (voluntary associations of peasants) helped to protect their members against various forms of danger and disaster. These fraternities helped members who were experiencing hardship because of these calamities, often providing stipends or loans.

- Local law also attempted to protect peasants from extreme poverty. So-called poor laws allowed peasants in hardship to pick peas or beans from the edges of any field in their village during daylight hours and to collect grain that had been spilled during the harvest.

- The cattle plague would remain incurable until the development of vaccines in the 1950s. In medieval times, people used economic countermeasures. The loss of meat could be countered by expanding the stocks of sheep or pigs. In some cases, lords and estate managers got rid of infected animals by selling them at low prices. Occasionally there was also slaughter of diseased cattle to avoid further casualties.

- These strategies were signs of adaptive resilience. At the same time, they were not enough to address the crisis. Factors like overpopulation and malnutrition were aggravated by the hoarding of grain by landlords and by costly and destructive military campaigns. Starvation was widespread in England well into the 1330s.

Flooding

- Coastal flooding was another threat in the Middle Ages. Many parts of Europe feature extremely low-lying land and are therefore prone to flooding. In parts of Europe that were particularly vulnerable, like the Low Countries, medieval communities organized themselves to develop more effective sea defenses.

- There was heightened storminess in the North Sea from the 1250s onward, and in Holland and Flanders, local communities banded together to address the danger of storm surges. They worked under the aegis of so-called water boards.

- These were associations of landowners that collaborated to ensure the maintenance and repair of walls, drains, and ditches. They supervised large labor forces with hundreds of permanent workers. In the 13th and 14th centuries, they invested heavily after major flooding events.

- Managing sea defenses and dealing with the threat from the ocean were originally the responsibilities of communities along the coast and was therefore a local matter. However, the process became more centralized as it became clear that a broader sector of the population needed to shoulder the financial burden.

- It was not just the Dutch who mobilized effectively to deal with the threat of flooding in medieval Europe. Across the English Channel, in the Thames estuary, increased flooding problems in the early 14th century were matched by investments in the water control system and by special commissions to supervise flood protection. Before the Black Death, the Canterbury Cathedral priory invested repeatedly in water control projects on its marshland estates.

- After a major 1333 flood in Florence, the city authorities formed a committee to oversee repairs and lowered taxes on imported foodstuffs. Their experience in mobilizing against disaster would be invaluable 15 years later, when epidemic disease arrived in their midst.

Earthquakes

- Earthquakes shook the European continent in the years preceding and during the Black Death. In the minds of medieval observers, these two forms of disaster—earthquake and plague—were very closely connected.

- The study of seismicity in the medieval world is a cutting-edge field. Relevant here is a leading research project based at Durham University. The focus of the project is the adaptive strategies that medieval people adopted in the face of seismic activity. According to Paolo Forlin, one of the researchers, earthquake-impacted medieval communities "were able to put strategies in place that often resemble modern risk management."

- Fourteenth-century narrative descriptions of the arrival of the plague are frequently accompanied by references to earthquakes. Henry Knighton (a chronicler from Leicester, England) reported massive seismic activity in the Mediterranean. He wrote that in Greece, "many citizens were buried when the earth swallowed them." Cyprus and Naples also suffered.

- There was major seismic activity in northern Italy, Bavaria, and Austria in January 1348, very shortly before the plague. A powerful earthquake also struck Italy in 1349 during the plague, with its epicenter at L'Aquila. (This was the very same site as a devastating modern quake in 2009.) Additionally, Gabriele de Mussis described seismic activity in South Asia or the Indian Ocean.

- Modern readers have sometimes assumed earthquake reports reflected paralyzing medieval neurosis. Undoubtedly, for some contemporaries, these reports must have fed a fear that the end of the world was

approaching or that God had chosen to punish Europe as he had once punished Sodom and Gomorrah. But there is no doubt that these earthquakes really occurred.

- It's also worth noting that, even when they were confronted by major earthquakes, medieval observers were perfectly capable of reasoned, scientific responses, some of which linked the earthquakes to the plague. Some modern observers have also suggested a link, hypothesizing, for instance, that earthquakes in Asia may have destroyed rodent shelters and food supplies. This would have forced plague-carrying rodents beyond their normal habitats, catalyzing contact with human settlements.

- Medieval scientific explanations were not the same as ours, and they were not based on empirical testing. But on their own terms, they were internally rational and drew on ancient medical wisdom.

- The great Roman medical writer Galen had suggested that cracks in the surfaces of the earth such as those caused by earthquakes could give rise to miasma—unseen poisonous vapor containing particles of decomposed matter—and hence to disease. Following this line, one 14th-century German treatise stated: "It is a matter of scientific fact that earthquakes are caused by the exhalation of fumes enclosed in the bowels of the earth."

- Along with a rational search for scientific causation, there was an emphasis on efficient community responses to seismic activity, including the delivery of medical aid and food supplies and the creation of temporary housing. Additionally, medieval people actively rebuilt their towns and cities in the wake of these earthquakes.

Reading

Campbell, *The Great Transition*.
Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*.
Smoller, "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography."

Questions

1 True or false? One of the greatest disasters to have afflicted Europe in the generations before the Black Death was the great cattle plague.

2 True or false? The accounts of earthquakes in 14th-century sources are probably a sign of mass hysteria.

Answers: 1 True; **2** False

Plague Medicine: Opium, Gold, Poison Clouds

Educated medieval doctors approached the plague in probing, multifaceted ways. Notions of divine punishment were accompanied by a search for natural, scientific causes, which they examined in plague treatises. On a practical level, doctors responded to the Black Death—and later waves of plague—intelligently and compassionately. Some of their approaches may have been beneficial to patients. As a result, their prestige rose.

Plague Doctors and Treatises

- Plague-era doctors were committed to their patients. They looked after the sick, often risking their lives in the process. Four testaments from Bologna in Italy refer to doctors lying on their deathbeds, having contracted the disease. Some of the most illustrious medical authorities of the day would fall victim to the Black Death, although not before leaving their own detailed analyses.

Chaucer's Lauded Doctor

A prestigious doctor appears in *The Canterbury Tales*, which Geoffrey Chaucer began to write at the end of the 1380s. In all the world, there was no one to rival this doctor's skill in medicine and surgery, Chaucer tells us; he knew the cause for every malady.

- Eventually, plague treatises began to proliferate in Muslim and Jewish communities as well as among Christians. The purpose of these treatises was to explain the disease scientifically, to offer advice on how to avoid it, and to describe how to cure those unfortunate enough to catch it.

- This was a new medical genre in some ways, but it built on the wisdom of earlier generations. In the Italian city of Salerno, Arabic-language medical texts following in the footsteps of Hippocrates and Galen had been translated into Latin—a reminder of how much the medieval west owed to the energy of the Islamic world.

- After the plague, Arabic medical manuscripts continued to circulate, notably among Jewish physicians in Spain, some of whom also wrote their own Arabic-language medical treatises on plague and other subjects. They wrote Hebrew treatises on plague, too, among them a book entitled *A Well for Life*, written by a Jewish doctor named Isaac ben Todros. Meanwhile, medical theory was being offered to students at Christian universities like those in Bologna and Paris.

- Not everyone could afford the personal services of a trained doctor. Many would have gone to barber surgeons, who carried out bloodletting and lanced buboes. Some would have tried religious cures like prayer and pilgrimage. Others consulted unlicensed but often highly skilled doctors, including women.

- One prominent female doctor of the previous generation had been a Frenchwoman named Jacoba Felicie. Jacoba had been working in Paris in the 1320s, but she had no formal medical education. The powerful male doctors in the Paris medical faculty took umbrage and had taken her to court.

- At the trial, Jacoba claimed that the old legal statute her accusers were invoking was valid only against ignorant old women and inexperienced fools, but that this didn't apply to her, because she was young and skillful. Sadly, Jacoba lost her case; the Paris medical faculty prevailed.

- It was this medical faculty that in 1348, at the height of the plague, produced one of the most famous of all plague treatises. Their report was commissioned by the king of France, Philip VI. Modern scholars of the Black Death have paid close attention to this treatise ever since a historian named Émile Rébouis translated it from Latin at the end of the 19th century.

The View from Paris

- A striking aspect of the report is the doctors' confidence that human reason would (sooner or later) be able to identify the natural causes of the plague. People's desire for understanding would eventually lead to a rational solution.

- God plays an interesting role in their thinking. They acknowledge that any pestilence ultimately comes from divine will. However, they conclude that we should still listen to the scientific expertise of doctors because "although God alone cures the sick, he does so through the medicine which in his generosity he has provided."

- The doctors of Paris were more interested in natural causes than in divine motivations. They emphasized the toxic conjunction of three planets (Saturn, Mars, and Jupiter) in 1345.

- This would have been absorbed by students like Gervaise Chretien, a physician from the age. When Gervaise founded a new medical college at the University of Paris in 1370, he made sure it was well supplied with books on astrology and all the necessary scientific instruments.

Corruption of the Air

- Some plague treatises, like the one written by Gentile da Foligno, had little or nothing to say about the stars. The more universally accepted foundation was the theory that the plague had spread because of the corruption of the air.

- The air had become poisoned, corrupted by some evil substance. Doctors often attributed this to the effects of seismic activity and suggested that the toxic air was spread by winds or gales. When people inhaled this poisonous air, the poison went straight to their heart or their lungs, with lethal consequences.

- This theory reflects what we know to be true: The bacterium *Yersinia pestis* can indeed be transmitted through the air in its pneumonic form. It's worth underscoring that 14th-century doctors were also aware that the disease could be spread person-to-person by airborne transmission.

- Most doctors in Christendom accepted both the theory of a poison cloud (a so-called miasma) and the importance of person-to-person transmission. Even after the discovery of the plague bacterium at the end of the 19th century, English colonial officials continued to believe in corrupted air (as well as infected soil).

Prevention

- Medieval medicine emphasized preventive measures, including maintaining a proper diet. Doctors made recommendations according to the theory of humors, which dates back all the way to Galen. They aimed to ensure a harmonious balance between the four fluids (or humors) that dictated bodily health—blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm—and the different qualities that corresponded to them, which were hot, cold, wet, and dry.

- Calls for moderation are a constant motif in the plague treatises. John of Burgundy recommended avoiding overindulgence as well as baths and anything else that might open the pores of the skin, including sex.

- He was wary of fruit unless it was acidic. Acidic substances were considered useful because—according to the theory of humors—they were dry and cold, working as an antidote to the hot, moist pestilence. The Catalan doctor and lecturer Jacme d'Agramont recommended oranges, lemons, and other acidic fruits.

- Along with these dietary recommendations, doctors underscored the importance of avoiding fear, anger, and depression. It was better to find merriment by playing, singing, dancing, and telling stories.

- It was also important, as far as physicians of the time were concerned, to seek good living conditions. Higher ground with clean air was preferable. Marshy and muddy places were to be avoided.

- Given the view that toxic, corrupted air was the primary cause of plague, logically it seemed helpful to cleanse and purify that air. Fumigation with aromatic herbs was a common preventative measure.

Measures after Plague Contraction

- For people who did contract the plague, medical treatises outlined a number of remedies. Often, doctors faced with the need to cure a patient tried measures such as bloodletting. They also recommended cordials to invigorate organs and to counter the poison.

- One of the most prominent antidotes was the compound medicine known as theriac. This was often prescribed as a thick, syrupy liquid. It contained dozens of ingredients, including cinnamon, saffron, pepper, and rhubarb.

- Theriac had been prescribed for a variety of ailments ever since ancient times. At one point it had included viper flesh, although this fell out of favor by the 14th century.

- One ingredient that continued to be used in theriac preparation was opium, from what is now Turkey or from the eastern coast of Italy. Theriacs containing opium continued to be used as late as the 19th century.

Gold

- Medieval times saw a desire to harness gold's power by creating a refined, drinkable elixir that might cure all diseases. For one member of the Franciscan order writing in the 1350s, there was only one surefire remedy for plague. It was one that should be used only by those who were certain their individual sins were not being punished by God, in which case nothing would work.

- If they were certain, they could try beating down pure gold (or gold coins) so that it formed thin leaves. Then, the gold should be melted and tossed in a vessel filled with distilled wine alcohol to produce a gold quintessence, as it was known. This would have the power to preserve all forms of matter from corruption. It could therefore ensure invulnerability to death and disease.

- Of course, not all experiments are successful. Even in our own time, many, like the search for a gold elixir, prove to be fruitless dead ends. The attempt to find a scientific solution to human mortality continues.

- But this medieval quest for an elixir reflects a historically vital shift in the generations after the Black Death: Far from being an age of desperation or blind faith, this was a period of confidence in the power of science and medicine to transform our lives.

Reading

Black, ed., *Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West*.
Siraisi, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine*.
Wallis, ed., *Medieval Medicine*.

Questions

1 True or false? The miasma (poison cloud) theory continued to circulate as late as the 19th century.

2 What is theriac?

- **a** A form of plague analogous to the bubonic and pneumonic forms
- **b** A compound medicine, usually containing opium
- **c** A type of medieval medical training prominent at the University of Paris

Answers: 1 True; 2 b

Filth: How Medieval Cities Fought the Plague

Examining medieval cities, scholars have found a society that was quite aware of the dangers of dirt, contamination, and pollution. Was this because of the Black Death? Did the plague bring about a radical change in public health? Did it play a significant role in the collective learning process? To begin to answer these questions, this lecture begins by looking at public health before the plague first struck Europe.

Sabine's Articles

- One of the first historians to look closely at this intriguing issue was a scholar named Ernest Sabine, who lived in the 1930s in Muncie, Indiana. He wrote a series of three articles that appeared in the notable journal *Speculum*.

- In the first article, Sabine ventured into the messy business of butchery in medieval London. He found that the city was by no means particularly unsanitary, even before the plague.

  - For instance, in 1301–1302, jurors charged four female butchers with throwing putrid blood and "vile filth" directly into the king's highway.

- Found guilty, they were ordered to carry their animal waste to the Thames and throw it into the river as the tide was flowing back out to sea.

- In other words, there was a real attempt to keep the streets clean, if not yet the river.

✶ Sabine's second article dealt with the even more pungent topic of latrines and cesspools in London. Again, he found reasons to be cheerful. There were public toilets on the streets of 13th-century London. Better still, people were in favor of the idea of using them.

✶ The third and final article in Ernest Sabine's trilogy, which appeared in 1937, turned to the question of city cleaning. London's streets would have been narrow, even more so in the heart of the city.

- Sometimes people would have been tempted to cast what he termed "the liquid part of their filth" out of the windows. But there was a danger of being caught because the authorities were on it.

- They wanted to keep the streets, and increasingly the river, clean. In the early 14th century, there was a series of ordinances making sure that the river could be safely navigated.

Measures in Pistoia

✶ The story that Sabine depicted for pre-plague London has plenty of parallels on the European continent. For instance, the historian Guy Geltner has shown that by the time of the Black Death, multiple Italian cities had specific officials responsible for public health. One example was Bologna, where an official known as the *fango* was responsible for public cleanliness.

- Of all Italian urban centers, it's the town of Pistoia that is best known to historians of the Black Death. This is because on May 2, 1348, precisely as the plague approached, the council enacted a detailed set of ordinances that survive to this day.

- One element was a travel ban stipulating that, with sickness threatening the region, "no citizen or resident of Pistoia … shall dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca." These towns were close to the coast, and the travel ban's focus on them reflects an awareness that the disease was being spread via maritime routes.

- Another clause further reflects an awareness that this was a contagious disease that could be spread by the cloth trade. Other regulations went into effect as well.

Health Policies

- Across Europe, the plague brought a significant ratcheting-up of health policies. This would last for the rest of the 14th century, and it was especially prominent in the city-states of Italy.

- Florence provides us a good example. Interestingly, the father of the famous writer Giovanni Boccaccio was active in public health on behalf of the city government of Florence.

  - As early as April 1348, sick people from infected towns like Pisa and Genoa were prohibited from entering Florence.

  - The government emphasized the need for cleaning the city of garbage and for avoiding what they called the "corruption and infection of the air" arising from "putrid and corrupt things and bodies."

  - As in Pistoia, there was an attempt to limit the textile trade, and the number and size of medical hospitals in Florence was ramped up.

- Quite early on, there were trade and travel bans in Milan. In Mantua, the ruling lord proclaimed that anyone who had passed through a place where the great mortality raged could neither enter nor return to the city.

- Measures of this kind were not universally applied, but they became more common and widespread from the 1420s. The same was true of quarantining, meaning the detention of groups of people who do not appear to be ill for a fixed period of 30 or 40 days to make sure that they are not infected.

- Historians believe that this policy was first applied in 1377 after the third major plague outbreak, in the city of Ragusa (now Dubrovnik) on the coast of what is now Croatia. Here, the authorities adopted a 30-day isolation period for all incoming ships.

Authoritative Intervention

- Beyond northern Italy and Ragusa, the situation looked somewhat different. In England, for example, there was no policy of quarantining. But here, after the plague, there does seem to have been an ad hoc intensification of public health policies.

- Some of the most decisive actions were taken by the English crown, beginning as early as 1349. By April of that year, the impact of the plague seems to have taken its toll on the usual ability of the city authorities to keep the streets of the capital clean.

- King Edward III intervened, writing an urgent letter to the lord mayor of London that read in part:

> The human feces and other filth lying in the streets and lanes of the city and its suburbs [are] to be removed with all speed to places far distant from that city.

- In 1354, King Edward wrote again, protesting about the stench from animal entrails being left on the wharf of the Fleet River. It was so close to Fleet Prison, he wrote, that it was dangerous to the health of the prisoners.

- A year later, he ordered an inquest into the filth in the prison ditch, from the privies built over it by private citizens. He continued to monitor the situation closely for the rest of the decade, and in 1357, he wrote again to the mayor, citing the presence of "dung and other filth" as well as "fumes and other abominable stenches" near the Thames.

- He commanded the mayor to deal with this right away. There were serious attempts to enforce the regulations. In 1364, two women were arrested for throwing refuse from their houses onto the highway and abusing the alderman when he protested. In 1375, a man was arrested for throwing dirty water onto someone else.

- The danger of plague was often the most pressing reason for crackdowns. For the second half of the 14th century and beyond, London lived with the constant threat of a new pandemic. There were at least four major outbreaks in the late 14th century.

- On every occasion, there was a flurry of health intervention. For instance, in the plague year of 1361, the king issued a writ against slaughtering animals inside London because of the blood flowing down the streets down the open sewers.

- Sometimes local lords acted as well. That was the case with the bishop of Wells, who supported residents when they started a project to introduce piped water.

Conclusion

- Attitudes toward public health and the environment in the 14th century were filtered through a very moralistic prism. An emphasis on human corruption, sin, and pollution may have hindered a more widespread adoption of policies based on medical theories of contagion.

- Additionally, there were limits to the success of urban cleaning projects in medieval England and elsewhere. It was precisely this fact that meant that the English king had to intervene so often.

- But modern society's difficulties in maintaining the cleanliness of our environment should once again remind us to be modest in our judgment of the medieval world. Faced with an extraordinary threat to their survival, late medieval people constantly pursued the goal of public health.

Reading

Geltner, *Roads to Health*.
Henderson, *The Renaissance Hospital*.
Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies*.
Sabine, "Latrines and Cesspools."

Questions

1 Who or what was the *fango*?

- **a** A dance used to ward off the plague in the city of Valencia
- **b** An official responsible for public cleanliness in the city of Bologna
- **c** A demon believed to be responsible for infecting the air in the city of Florence

2 True or false? The first known instance of quarantining occurred in Ragusa (now Dubrovnik) in the second half of the 14th century.

Answers: **1** b; **2** True

Laughter and Joy: Boccaccio's *Decameron*

The *Decameron* is one of the greatest works of medieval literature. The Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio created it during and immediately after the Black Death. Reflecting its quality, the *Decameron* was immediately popular and widely illustrated in manuscripts of the 14th and 15th centuries.

Death and Joy

- One story in the *Decameron* is the tale of the lovers Gabriotto and Andreola. The dreams in this story reflect the shadow of sudden death, always present in medieval society—and never more so than in these decades.

- The fear of sudden death and the preoccupation with ensuring salvation was everywhere in the late Middle Ages. Yet, paradoxically, this was also an age which embraced the joy of living. This joie de vivre is as conspicuous in the art, literature, and humor of the age as the fear of sudden death—perhaps more so.

- There's good evidence that the art scene of the post-plague era was, in many respects, vibrant and inventive. A great deal of it was extremely pious; after all, churches and monastic orders remained among the wealthiest patrons, and money flowed into their coffers as apprehensive believers sought to guarantee their salvation.

- That reveals how the business of art continued to thrive in the decades after the plague. And the spiritual preoccupation of patrons, heightened by the ongoing waves of plague, resulted in art that was filled with bright color, creative energy, and elements of optimism. Consciously or not, many artists of the age injected a spirit of hope, humanity, and joy.

- For example, consider the frescoes in the so-called Spanish chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. No fewer than 325 friars of the Dominican Order had died during the plague at Santa Maria Novella.

- In the 1350s, that church was dominated by a Dominican preacher named Passavanti. He oversaw some of the most ambitious frescoes of the time, some promoting the image of the Dominican Order as an essential instrument of salvation.

- The frescoes are complex. One shows Dominican monks ushering young girls toward the gates of paradise. The girls are dressed in colorful, luminous clothes. In the background, three young boys are climbing fruit trees, passing their pickings to their friends on the ground. There is more to life, for this painter, than piety and platitude. There is also joy.

The Triumph of Death and Its Artist

- One work of visual art that has sometimes been seen as a reflection of post-plague darkness and morbidity is an Italian fresco entitled *The Triumph of Death*. However, current scholarship actually dates it not to the post-plague period but to the 1330s. It's believed that the artist was a man named Bonamico, who was a friend of Giovanni Boccaccio.

The Triumph of Death fresco painting

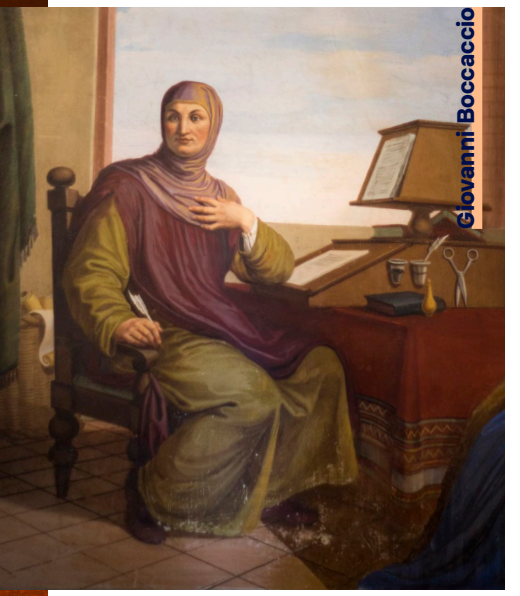
- Bonamico was nicknamed Buffalmacco. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was completed in the immediate aftermath of the plague, Buffalmacco features in multiple stories. In all of them, he pulls a prank on one of his friends, a simple-minded artist named Calandrino.

- A love of practical jokes ran like a thread through late medieval Italian culture. Sometimes these jokes could be rather cruel. There was joy in the planning, the clever deceit, and the delightful exposure of stupidity. But there was also joy in human life and human foibles.

Giovanni Boccaccio

- At the time of the Black Death, Giovanni Boccaccio would have been in his late 30s. He was born in Florence out of wedlock in 1313. Through his father's connections, he eventually spent time at the court of King Robert of Naples, getting to know Neapolitan royalty and aristocracy.

- This was an age in which good rulership meant—among other things—intellectual leadership and the patronage of culture, science, and the arts. The royal court was a place where Boccaccio could imbibe knowledge of astrology, geography, and geology. By the age of 18, he had also begun to study canon law. But to his father's chagrin, his real passion was poetry.



- By the beginning of the 1340s, Boccaccio had returned to Florence. He continued to travel, looking to other court cultures for employment, but he was in Florence when the pandemic struck in early 1348.

- His father was active in public health, working for the city government. Boccaccio was an eyewitness to many of the effects of the Black Death in Florence, and his description of its physical and social symptoms may also have drawn on details he received from his father.

- This was a deeply painful and personal tragedy for Boccaccio. He saw many of his closest friends killed by the plague. His second stepmother also died, and soon afterward, so did his father. There is also no further mention of his uncle after this time.

- As the eldest son, he suddenly found himself head of the family with responsibility for the patrimony left by his father. He was the guardian of his little stepbrother Jacobo, who was roughly eight years old. He inherited two houses in Florence and a third in the nearby village of Certaldo.

- If this new inheritance may have been something of a silver lining, he must also have been grief-stricken and traumatized. Yet Boccaccio's almost immediate response to this trauma was the completion of one of the greatest works in the medieval literary canon.

The *Decameron*

- The *Decameron* presents 100 tales within tales, recounted over a 10-day period by 10 refined and well-born people. This group includes seven young women and three young men, a trait it shares with the fresco *The Triumph of Death*.

- The group has taken refuge in the hills above Florence from the plague afflicting the city. On every day except Saturday and Sunday, each of the 10 young people tells a tale on a theme established by the person who is chosen to preside over that day.

- The *Decameron* is suffused with humor, pathos, beauty, ugliness, and fierce intelligence. It's a sea of stories, expressing an infinite joy in life and human nature as well as an acute sensitivity to the specter of sudden death.

Motifs in Boccaccio's Work

- One of the stories tells the tale of another dim-witted man: Master Simone, a doctor of Bologna. In this story, Buffalmacco's friend Bruno regales Simone with fake news about the philosopher Michael Scot, a wandering scholar who had lived and taught in Bologna slightly more than a century earlier. Michael Scot was famed for his translations of Aristotle, but by Boccaccio's time, he had also acquired a reputation for dabbling in magic and necromancy.

- Michael Scot's disciples, says Bruno, had founded a society to which both he and Buffalmacco belong. At the regular meetings of this society, the finest foods are served, and the most exotic and delectable women attend. Doctor Simone is desperate to join and assiduously spends time buttering up Bruno.

- Bruno tells him that he must cultivate Buffalmacco's friendship because Buffalmacco has been appointed captain of this society, and the doctor starts treating them both to the most delicious suppers. Their deception escalates until a prank results in Doctor Simone ending up in a sewer. However, having been deceived about the nature of the prank, the doctor continues to spoil the two pranksters.

- The toilet humor of the tale is one hallmark of late medieval comic literature. It appears in Geoffrey Chaucer's work, too. Another striking motif in Boccaccio's work—another reflection of his joie de vivre—is his racy embrace of sexual desire. That motif is prominent, for instance, in the *Decameron*'s lighthearted tale of Caterina and the handsome Ricardo, who woos her.

Conclusion

- Scholars have rightly pointed out that Boccaccio's tone began to change significantly from the middle of the 1350s onward. His later works are more serious, more moralistic, and less playful. Under the influence of his friend Petrarch and a new spirit of piety, he turned his back on the theme of love and on risqué humor.

- A great deal of his earlier work, he wrote, had been "less than decent and opposed to modesty." His female readers, he added, might judge him "a filthy pimp and an incestuous old man." He eventually came to believe that poetry and theology were related, both revealing the mystery of life.

- Across Europe, others would carry the torch of joy, picking up where Boccaccio had left off. Most notable by far was Geoffrey Chaucer, who visited Florence in early 1373. He may well have come across Boccaccio's poetry at that time. If not, he would certainly have done so in a later trip to Milan, in 1378, which was ruled by the tyrannical but cultured Visconti dynasty.

Reading

Boccaccio, *Decameron*.
Armstrong et al., *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*.
Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena*.

Questions

1 What's the problem with using the Italian fresco entitled *The Triumph of Death* as evidence that the generations after the plague were uniquely obsessed with death and dying?

a It's a 20th-century forgery.

b It was painted before the plague.

c It contains comedic elements.

d It has been lost.

2 In the *Decameron*, Giovanni Boccaccio tells multiple stories about his friend Buffalmacco. What do these stories have in common?

a The tragedy of sudden death

b Hostility to the church

c An emphasis on moral virtue

d Pranks and jokes

Answers: 1 b; 2 d

Wives, Widows, and Witches

This lecture looks at how women fared in medieval times. The picture is mixed. Some women took leading roles in positions such as rulers of state and businesspeople; others led challenging lives, facing hardships like accusations of witchcraft.

An Obsession

- Misogyny and sexism—like racism—often come to the surface in periods of social crisis. When medieval chroniclers looked for explanations in the face of the plague, many turned their eyes to women. For instance, one account by Henry Knighton surmised that God had become wrathful because women had begun attending chivalric tournaments cross-dressing as men, carrying weapons, and behaving in a thoroughly masculine fashion.

- Many people in the 14th century were obsessed with the question of women's autonomy, self-assertion, and sexual agency. One of the leading feminist scholars writing about medieval Europe, Judith Bennett, has written that in late medieval English songs, there is a hyperabundance of "sexually active maidens" having a very good time.

- The most famous feisty lady of the late 14th century is surely Chaucer's Wife of Bath, Alison: a free woman on the road to Canterbury, enjoying the company of men. She is upwardly mobile, wealthy, and gap-toothed (a medieval sign of sexuality). She's somewhat deaf as a result of being clobbered on the ear by her last husband.

- She's a skilled clothmaker, and she likes to dress up in her finery, including bright red stockings. She's an enthusiastic pilgrim—she's traveled to Rome, Jerusalem, Cologne in Germany, and Santiago de Compostela—and there's no suggestion that her love of travel has very much to do with spiritual piety. Alison likes to go along for the adventure, laughing and chatting on her way.

- Is the Wife of Bath a feminist character? The issue has been hotly debated. In the prologue to her own tale, she articulates a range of views that were probably being voiced by real people in Chaucer's age, and which can be described as feminist. Alison rejects any suggestion that women's sexuality and her own multiple marriages might be seen as sinful.

- Admittedly, Alison says, some churchmen have advised virginity, but their advice is not a commandment. She is militant—influenced by Venus, by her own reckoning, but also by Mars (the god of war).

- She demonstrates this quality when, in a climactic episode of her own life story, she tells how, while her fifth husband was reading aloud from an insufferable book about "wicked wives," she angrily tore some pages from it:

> Suddenly, I plucked three leaves from his book, as he read, and hit him with my fist so hard on the check that he fell down backwards into the fire. Up he leapt, just like a lion, and punched me in the head so hard that I lay on the floor, as if dead.

- Some scholars believe that Chaucer was presenting Alison as getting her punishment for being so outspoken. Chaucer, they say, is mocking her. However, consider this counterpoint: Her tale itself is a yarn of a knight who is obliged to discover, before a year elapses, what it is that women really want. The tale's answer can be stated in one word: *sovereignty*. Women want autonomy.

- This answer was clearly circulating in late 14th-century England. We do not need to see Chaucer himself as a feminist author to recognize that he is giving serious airtime to a liberated female character.

- The question of women's status was certainly in the air. It was articulated most fully by the early 15th-century writer Christine de Pisan. Christine challenged the foundations of medieval misogyny. Although she encouraged women to be obedient to their husbands, she also argued that if women were weaker or less competent than men, it was because they hadn't been given the same education and training.

Medieval Royalty

- Historians have shown that in medieval times, there were significant numbers of royal women exerting very real power. This had been true well before the Black Death. The 12th-century queen Eleanor of

Aquitaine may be the most famous example, but Eleanor has a great deal of company. In medieval Spain and Portugal, for instance, there had been many royal women with considerable power.

- It was not only queens who exerted royal power but also other royal women. These included the so-called infantas of Castile and León, who had had many independent sources of income.

- Turning back to queens, in Geoffrey Chaucer's England, an influential one was Anne of Bohemia, who had married Richard II when both were in their mid-teens. Anne died in 1394, perhaps from the plague, at the age of only 28. Yet she was celebrated for her diplomatic skill as a mediator, tempering the violent judgment of the king.

Other Influential Women

- Women much further down the social scale also exerted important forms of power and agency. Country women, for instance, regularly brought eggs, poultry, milk, butter, and cheese to market to sell. They worked in the fields, especially during the hay and grain harvests, and in the brewing industry and the sale of beer. They even hunted rabbits. All these activities involved significant numbers of women in late medieval towns as well as in the countryside.

- The historian Caroline Barron posits that during the late Middle Ages, women had a significant measure of economic power and independence: running their own businesses, paying their taxes, training their own apprentices, and so forth. They were active in many kinds of trade and craft, including modest trades like selling fish and more glamorous ones like the silk industry.

- Widows could inherit a third of their late husband's property (if there were children) or half (if there weren't any). Some widows financially thrived. One such woman was Alice Claver, a 15th-century silk manufacturer who was commissioned with supplying tufts of silk and gold to decorate the coronation gloves of King Richard III.

- The idea of a golden age after the Black Death is still being debated. There are certainly some good reasons for optimism; for instance, women appear to have been living longer in the later Middle Ages than they had been earlier on because of better diets, including more meat consumption.

Grim Signs

- Unfortunately, there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that life for ordinary women continued to be grim. For instance, as capitalism developed in 15th-century Europe, accusations of witchcraft also became increasingly common.


Morgan Le Fay

- Some women became victims of pathological fears about the presence of the devil. At the end of the 15th century came the witchcraft-focused book *The Hammer of Witches*. We can think of the very end of the Middle Ages and the early modern period as the heyday of witch hunting.

- In the realm of literature, the female heroines of earlier medieval literature become increasingly vilified. As Judith Bennett shows in a remarkable essay, back in the 13th century, the Arthurian female character Morgan Le Fay had been portrayed as a healing maiden, but all of

this had changed by the time of Thomas Malory's 15th-century classic *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In Malory's hands, Morgan tries to kill her husbands and even King Arthur himself, stealing his sword Excalibur to carry out the deed.

Challenging Lives

- Patriarchy survived the plague. Women inherited less land than they should have after the Black Death. The men in the family continued to seize the lion's share, as they had done before the plague. Daughters lacked the economic security and certainty that their brothers enjoyed. Because of their economic insecurity, many working women favored yearly contracts, which paid less than casual daily or weekly work.

- Family life continued to be dominated by men. If things were bad in England, it may have been even worse in Mediterranean Europe because of the age differences in this region.

- Here, the age of women at marriage fell significantly after the Black Death. Italian women were married long before reaching the age of 20. (For men, the average age was around 26, and it was close to 30 in urban areas.)

- Across Europe, the economic insecurity of women often gave way to desperation. In periods of high prices and famine, or when the demand for labor fell in the agricultural sector, many women left the countryside for the crowded cities. Some were reduced to begging or forced into sex work.

- Cities saw sporadic enforcement of bans on prostitution. One of the few places in England that had licensed brothels was Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames. This was where Chaucer's fictional pilgrims set off from the Tabard Inn in *The Canterbury Tales*. A city ordinance in 1393 banned prostitutes from the city of London itself and banished them to Southwark.

- Life was hard for many medieval women, including widows. The loss of a husband may have brought property to some, but for many women, it meant even more economic precariousness.

- At the bottom of the social ladder was the enslaved population. There were significant numbers of slaves in trading cities like Genoa, Florence, Venice, Barcelona, and, increasingly, Seville. Some 80% of these slaves were women.

Reading

Bennett, "Queens, Whores and Maidens."
Bennett and Karras, eds., *Oxford Handbook on Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*.
Goldberg, *Women in England*.

Questions

1 Why, according to his chronicle, did Henry Knighton believe that women were responsible for the plague?

- **a** Because of Eve's disobedience to God, as described in Genesis
- **b** Because they were attending chivalric tournaments while cross-dressing as men
- **c** Because of their refusal to obey their husbands
- **d** Because they represented a source of temptation to the monks

2 True or false? At the time of Chaucer, Southwark—where *The Canterbury Tales* begins—was one of the few places in the country that had licensed brothels.

Answers: 1 b; 2 True

10

Justice in the Age of Robin Hood

By around 1400, two generations after the plague, the deeds of the famous outlaw Robin Hood had been spread by word of mouth and by performing storytellers. Word of his exploits had been getting around for several decades. The tales were imprinted with the stamp of the late 14th century. These were decades when men outside the law fought for a deeper kind of justice. Robin Hood, Little John, and their comrades were committed to a life of robbery, seizing the goods of wealthy travelers who passed through their valley. These criminals preyed on people who embodied exploitation, greed, and dishonesty.

Background on the Era's Crime

- The early 14th century—the time before the Black Death—was not exactly calm and orderly. Medieval England had always had a high homicide rate, not least because Englishmen drank enormous quantities of alcohol and habitually carried knives.

The Man of Law

The "General Prologue" of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* tells us about the Man of Law, sometimes known as the Sergeant. He is an establishment man who made his way to the top of the justice system.

- The pre–Black Death period saw a remarkable phase of gang activity, often led by members of the local gentry (the lesser landholding class). The most notorious case was the armed band led by Eustace Folville and his brothers in the English Midlands during the 1320s and 1330s. They stole, poached, extorted, murdered, kidnapped, and wrought revenge on their enemies.

- How, then, did judicial systems across Europe respond in the face of the catastrophe of 1348–1351? The most vivid of all witnesses to the Black Death is Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio gives us the sense that there was complete social breakdown as plague took hold. "In the face of so much affliction and misery," he writes, "all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and had been extinguished in our city." There was almost no one left to impose law and order, he said.

- Echoing Boccaccio's description, the historian William Bowsky posited that the Black Death marked a watershed in the history of crime in Siena. After it struck, the situation got completely out of hand. In 1350, the city council lamented the bloodshed of the time.

- As for Florence, the evidence we have does suggest a temporary rise in theft, reflecting economic insecurities. In Venice, one chronicler noted that "in this plague arose countless robbers, who thieved and looted houses." Only in Genoa do we find evidence to the contrary: Gabriele de Mussis reported that theft from the houses of plague victims in Genoa was limited because thieves were afraid of catching the disease.

- In many parts of Europe, law enforcement would certainly have been disrupted. For instance, in England, both of the main courts of justice (known as the Court of Common Pleas and the Court of King's Bench) closed down temporarily in the summer of 1349.

- However, if we look at the broad picture, there is no strong evidence of a sustained crime wave in Europe after the Black Death. Most scholars now think that Boccaccio's vivid literary description was taking a fair amount of poetic license. It was probably shaped by descriptions of earlier epidemics; ultimately, Boccaccio's aim was always to tell the best possible story.

- Evidence from another Italian city, Bologna, suggests remarkable resilience in the administration of justice. There was, of course, some disruption, but the basic tasks of government carried on, even at the height of the plague. The criminal court remained active.

- Across Europe, there was temporary disruption in judicial systems but surprisingly quick recovery. The same was true in other branches of government. In Florence, for instance, the plague briefly interrupted tax collection and grain distribution.

  - It also changed the human face of government, opening plum jobs to new people, including town criers, stonemasons, and civic musicians.

  - In August 1349, Florence even sent a cook and bell ringer, who was nicknamed the "little idiot" for some obscure reason, on official business to Hungary.

- War, not plague, was the main concern for the government of Florence—and war refused to be interrupted. In June 1349, the poet Petrarch wrote a letter to Florentine officials demanding that the city wage war against a powerful family in the nearby mountains that was responsible for the death of his friends. Florence responded enthusiastically, undertaking two major military campaigns.

- Meanwhile, back in England, government became more centralized and efficient, for better or worse. Parliament issued sweeping new labor legislation. For the first time, the state emerged as the main authority in directing social policy. And for the next decade, Parliament continued to meet regularly, almost as if nothing had happened.

Crime, Law, and Justice

- Some people perceived that there came a wave of crime in the years that followed. Laws against free labor mobility were shaped by this fear. In 1376, the House of Commons accused laborers and artisans of becoming vagrants and forming gangs, robbing and thieving their way across the country.

- To a considerable extent, it was a matter of class. The people doing the perceiving—or at least, writing down their perceptions—tended to be social elites. Parliament, in the end, was an instrument of class control, serving the interests of the landed classes. Behind accusations of idleness, vice, and crime lay the specter of social unrest and rebellion.

- Law is not the same as justice, and order is often unjust. Jurors could be bought. Lawyers could be deployed to bring rivals to ruin. Wealthy medieval people could use the legal system to tighten the screws on the poor, too.

- It was precisely this that led the rebel leader Wat Tyler to request a special commission from the king in 1381 which would give him the right to behead all lawyers; from that time onward, he hoped, everything would be regulated by the common people. His fate is the subject of a later lecture, but in the context of his discontent, this lecture now turns to the figure of Robin Hood.

Robin Hood

- The original Robin Hood, if there was such a man, was probably active in the middle of the 13th century. The earliest ballads describing him place him in the north of England, near Wakefield in Yorkshire, which is envisioned as a wild and untamed frontier. But Robin Hood's fame spread quickly across the whole country. Outlaws and fugitives from justice adopted his name as far away as southern counties like Sussex.

- The folk ballad "A Gest of Robyn Hood" quickly introduces us to Robin, who is described as a "good yeoman," and his companions: Little John (also a yeoman), Much the miller's son, and good Scarlok (a man whose name is later rendered as Will Scarlet).

- According to the ballad, Robin is pious, going to three masses every day. He never harms women. When his men ask him whom they should rob, beat, and bind, Robin answers them "look ye do no [peasant] harm, that tilleth with his plow." Instead, he instructs them to direct their attacks at bishops and the sheriff of Nottingham.

- Robin's men live well and freely. In one tale, they assist a knight indebted to an unmerciful abbot, and in another, Little John enters the service of the sheriff

of Nottingham under a false name. Eventually, Little John recruits the sheriff's cook into Robin's band, and the two rob the sheriff's treasure house.

✶ All in all, Robin is a people's hero from outside the system. He is a figure that allowed medieval audiences to imagine their freedom from the laws of the rich, to laugh at the misfortunes of their social superiors, and to fantasize about vengeance.

Reading

Holt, *Robin Hood*.
Musson, *Crime, Law, and Society*.

Questions

1 City government recovered surprisingly quickly from the plague in Florence, as in other parts of Europe, even if this meant sending someone with an unusual nickname on official business to Hungary. What was this nickname?

a Little John
b Little Jane
c Little genius
d Little idiot

2 The earliest stories of Robin Hood were set in a supposedly wild frontier land. Where was this setting?

a The north near Wakefield in Yorkshire
b The southwest in Port Isaac in Cornwall
c The far west on the Pembrokeshire coastline of Wales

Answers: 1 d; 2 a

Into the Sky: How Plague Changed Faith

This lecture is largely focused on faith and on Francesco Petrarca, an Italian poet who lived from 1304 to 1374 and is often known in English as Petrarch. It was Petrarch who helped forge our notion of a shift from the medieval period to the Renaissance. In Christian tradition, Christ had brought light where once there had been darkness. Petrarch reapplied this way of thinking to history. He suggested that in his own age, the darkness of ignorance would be dispelled by a new age of culture and learning.

Petrarch's Love and Work

- For decades, Petrarch harbored an impassioned, although unrequited, love for a lady named Laura. In one bit of his writing, he recalled the exact day when he had first laid eyes on Laura and the anguish love had first inflicted on him:

> In 1327, at precisely
> the day's first hour, April 6, I entered
> This labyrinth, and I've found no escape.

- The plague, however, eventually took Laura away. Petrarch longed for a sight of her face, "so gracious and so holy." Her beauty had entrapped his heart.

- Petrarch's sonnets were often set to music and sung; they also pour off the page with startling immediacy. But they are also very much of their time and give us a glimpse of an important shift in 14th-century culture. The Black Death may well have helped to bring about a new phase of religious fervor and faith.

The Nature of Faith

- People would have been well aware of their responsibilities as good Christians. However, before the Black Death, there had been more of a spectrum of Christian faith than one might expect.

- Doubt was present, too. One 13th-century theologian related a dialogue in which one speaker seems to question the very existence of an afterlife. And a clergyman from London wrote that "there are many people who do not believe that God exists."

- It was doubt that required the constant reiteration of Christian principles. And it was the variety of faith that had led the church to establish an inquisition into heresy, which was overseen by the papacy. Inquisitors had fanned out across the continent, looking into supposedly deviant beliefs and practices.

- After the plague, there is evidence of religious skepticism or indifference. Some Christians were sluggish in their belief. This was an attitude that the poet William Langland depicted in his famous work *Piers Plowman*: "I don't keep account of vigils or fast-days," says one character, called Sloth, who continues, "They just seem to slip by."

- On the other hand, in the aftermath of the plague, many people experienced a noticeably more intense form of Christian belief.

  - For some, collective trauma unleashed a conviction that God was punishing humanity for its sins. To certain observers, God's fury was provoked by the laziness of the clergy, who had let their flocks wander away from the path of true religious belief.

  - For others, the problem was money, wealth, and pride. Vanity, they suggested, had infected the greedy new merchant classes and even the religious shepherds.

  - Whatever the cause, God's wrath was clearly so great that he had decided not to spare even the innocents: Children had perished in the millions, along with their parents.

- A black cloud of guilt had descended on 14th-century Europe. In the view of many, it was time to repent for sins by acknowledging and echoing Christ's self-sacrifice for humanity.

- Across Europe, men and women whipped themselves with leather straps, studded with metal, drawing blood from their bodies to appease divine fury. This was an act of penitence that echoed Christ's shedding of blood on Good Friday.

- Having at first welcomed this flagellant movement, the church would soon decide that such an extreme display of religious emotion was dangerous and that it should be condemned as a heresy. But there was no mistaking the intensity of faith in these troubled times.

Examining Petrarch

- Into this swirling current of religious belief stepped the poet Petrarch. Petrarch's earliest lyrics, dating from around 1327, are usually seen as being quite secular.

- However, for Petrarch, the Black Death was certainly a turning point, intensifying his Christian faith. Like almost everyone, he suffered painful personal losses during the plague. We can trace his response in his prolific letter-writing. In one letter, he expressed the trauma: "Wherever I turn my frightened eyes, their gaze is troubled by continual funerals."

- Petrarch lost some of his most dearly beloved friends. It was Laura's death that impacted him most profoundly. He wrote that she passed away on April 6, 1348, 21 years to the hour since he had first set eyes on her. In his beloved copy of a text by Virgil, he jotted down these words:

> To write these lines in bitter memory of this event, in the place where they will most often meet my eyes, is bittersweet, but I forget that nothing more should please me in this life.

- Petrarch was bereft. Laura had borne his very heart away, and he additionally wrote:

> She took it beneath the earth, into the sky
> where she triumphs now, wreathed in the laurel
> that her pure chastity was worthy of.

- The phrase "into the sky" indicates Laura has now become a more otherworldly, angelic creature. Petrarch longed to join her in paradise. The religious intensity of his language cannot be missed. He has begun to turn away from the world of fleshly, material things and toward a more incorruptible realm.

Petrarch's Pilgrimage and Meeting with Boccaccio

- The year 1350 was a jubilee year—a year established by the pope in which all sins might be forgiven. Petrarch marked the occasion by setting out on pilgrimage for Rome. It was a literally agonizing experience. The poet received a major wound when he was kicked by a horse; the resulting wound began to fester.

- But he attempted to process his agony as piously as possible. He wrote, "man is a vile, wretched animal unless he redeems the ignobility of the body with the nobility of the soul."

- Eventually returning from Rome, he arranged a rendezvous with another man of letters: Giovanni Boccaccio, who was nine years younger than the poet. He had admired Petrarch for many years and had even written a biography of him at the beginning of the 1340s.

- The meeting took place on a cold day in Florence in October 1350. Boccaccio had been courting the poet on behalf of the city government. At the height of the plague, a new university had been established in Florence with the aim of attracting talent to the city.

- The Florentines wanted to secure Petrarch as their star professor. They had even gone so far as to declare war on the Ubaldini clan to satisfy his thirst for vengeance. (Some of Petrarch's friends had earlier been attacked while passing through Ubaldini-controlled territory.) The conflict that has come to be known as Petrarch's war had ended in September 1350.

Petrarch's Later Work

- In the end, Boccaccio was unable to bring Petrarch to Florence. Petrarch left for France instead. He would settle near Avignon, finding beauty and comfort there. Sometimes, he would rise at midnight and go for a walk in the moonlight under the glimmering hills and fields. He pursued chastity.

- His commitment to spiritual discipline is reflected in a letter entitled "To Himself." He imagines himself burning and drowning in sin, and the only true port is faith. "I wonder if there is a way through the fire," he writes, "and whether a flood of tears can extinguish physical flames." More and more, he exchanged his earthly love for Laura for a spiritual commitment. His spiritual commitment was a form of resilience—one that was widely shared in the aftermath of the Black Death.

- In 1353, he moved to Milan, in a quiet spot away from the center. In the summer, he lived in a villa a few miles outside the city, near a monastery.

- Petrarch faced his own son's death from plague during the second great outbreak, in 1361. Still, he maintained his belief that the proper course of action was to steel himself stoically in the face of grief.

- Meanwhile, his friendship with Boccaccio endured. This was a relationship in which each man fed from the other's genius. In fact, it helped to catalyze one of the most glittering periods of literary production in European history.

- In a remarkable letter to the abbot of San Benigno in 1352, just one year after the first epidemic of plague had abated, Petrarch provided us with a picture of a world which has caught writing fever. It was fiercely devoted to the arts, and plagued, so to speak, by its own intellectual vitality. He used the imagery of contagious disease in a way that was playful, risky, and transgressive.

- After "a long period of neglect" a few years back, he relates, he had just begun to work again on his epic poem about the Carthaginian wars, entitled *Africa*. A friend concerned about Petrarch's overworking asked him for his keys to his writing cabinet, then locked away his writing materials and books. The friend prescribed rest for Petrarch.

- At one point, Petrarch recalled having "a headache from morning till night" and later "beginning to feel the first signs of fever." Eventually, relief arrived: "My friend returned, and seeing my plight gave me back the keys." Petrarch wondered if the "disease of writing" was "incurable" and spreadable. He asked, "How many, do you think, have caught it from me?"

- The dark humor in this letter is a coping mechanism, a psychological means of processing the traumatic impact of the pandemic. Laughter, after all, was a necessary medicine. But beneath the humor is a sharp observation about the vitality of his age. The writing fever he described was characteristic of this period. In the second half of the century, literary production would reach a new apex in Europe.

Reading

Caferro, *Petrarch's War*.
Dendle, "'The Age of Faith.'"
Young, *The Poetry of Petrarch*.

Questions

1 Which victim of the plague did Petrarch describe as having gone "beneath the earth, into the sky," becoming an otherworldly, angelic creature?

a Joanna of Naples
b Laura
c Bonne of Luxembourg
d Beatrice

2 Petrarch wrote of a headache he experienced "from morning till night" before later feeling the "first signs of fever." What fever was he describing?

a Quartan fever
b Romantic fever
c Travel fever
d Writing fever

Answers: 1 b; 2 d

12

Astrology, Apocalypse, and Plague

Around the mid-1300s, men and women would have had good reason to imagine that end times were coming. For instance, many endured multiplying natural disasters. Torrential rains drenched England and other parts of northern Europe, ruining a sequence of harvests. Devastating earthquakes rumbled across northern Italy and Austria, shaking mountains to their foundations. This lecture looks at how the beliefs of the people of this time informed their responses.

Apocalyptic Ideas

- Apocalyptic ideas had always flourished in Christendom during periods of crisis. But while people at the time of the Black Death may have seen the natural disasters around them as a sign of the unfolding apocalypse, they did not generally see them as marking the immediate end of the world.

- For medieval Christians, before the Last Judgment, there would first be a sequence of other events, including a phase of tribulation and the appearance of an Antichrist: a false messiah who would oversee the persecution of genuine Christians.

"The Miller's Tale"

In *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Miller's Tale" explores a wide register of human experience, from stargazing to navel-gazing. Geoffrey Chaucer himself was fascinated by astrology, by space, and by flight.

- After the reign of the Antichrist, there would be a long period—known as a millennium—in which peace would reign among all people. Christ would rule with the saints, and the supposed enemies of Christ would be converted.

- This line of thinking had been fleshed out in the 13th century by the followers of an Italian monk named Joachim of Fiore. His ideas had found fertile ground in the new Franciscan Order.

- Rumors of the coming of the Antichrist flourished during the plague years. Wild prophecies circulated across the continent. One account from the eastern English county of Norfolk referred to stories that the Antichrist had surfaced near Rome. Everywhere, the belief in the Antichrist tended to be accompanied by sharp, binary divisions between factions, such as good versus evil.

Empire against Papacy

- The struggle between the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire added fuel to the fire of apocalyptic sentiment. Some people believed that an earthly emperor (rather than Christ himself) would oversee 1,000 years of blessed harmony and that he might even do so before the coming of the Antichrist.

- Frederick II, holy Roman emperor and king of Sicily, was a popular choice for this role. Frederick had been a cultivated 13th-century ruler, but he had clashed violently with the papacy. His reputation remained vividly

alive, long after his passing, in the European imagination. When the Black Death struck, it was rumored that he would return from the dead to reform the church.


Frederick II

- The story of Frederick's imminent return bears the imprint of class resentment and the dream of social revolution. To remedy injustice, the resurrected emperor would marry rich men to poor women and rich women to poor men. He would restore property to orphans or others who had been wrongfully dispossessed. He would persecute corrupt clergymen.

- His reign would end only when he crossed the Mediterranean to the Holy Land. In apocalyptic thinking, Jerusalem was the ultimate center, the place where the final stages of history would unfold. This popular tale—a type of folk narrative—is useful evidence for the social historian, expressing the anger that would explode in rebellion in the second half of the century.

Political and Survival Messages

- Apocalyptic thinking played very immediately into the revolution of the Italian leader Cola di Rienzo. In 1347, he had launched an attempt to set himself up as a tribune of the people in Rome, aiming to restore the city to the glorious days of the ancient republic. His rhetoric reveals how the language of apocalypse could be harnessed to the hope of political change.

- But for many others, this language may have served more simply as a source of comfort, providing a sense of structure in a world that had been shaken to its roots. In this sense, it was a survival mechanism.

- Myths and tales help people to make sense of the world and to process the challenges that confront them. They may even help to transcend those challenges, enabling resilience.

- This is especially true of apocalypse narratives, which are told most widely at the moments of greatest crisis. The stories of the coming of the millennium or of the Antichrist that people told at the time of the Black Death were a source of reassurance that everything was, in some way, part of the divine plan.

Science

- The Black Death was not simply an occasion for old stories to be trotted out. It was also a stimulus for a relatively new phenomenon. Since the 13th century, some apocalyptic thinkers had also begun to fuse their ideas with what was then called natural philosophy—that is, science.

- Astrology was a well-developed form of rational inquiry, with a pedigree dating back to antiquity. The caliphs of Baghdad and the Muslim rulers of Córdoba had advanced the study of astrology, as had one of the most intellectual rulers of the Middle Ages, the 13th-century Spanish king Alfonso the Wise.

- Medieval astrologers were convinced that humanity was ultimately linked to the rest of the cosmos by immutable laws of nature. Although this may violate our sense of free will, it's interesting to ask whether this parallels our own modern inclination to imagine that scientific laws—chemical, physical, and biological—rule the whole universe.

Apocalyptic Thought and Science

Belief in the apocalypse was compatible with the pursuit of science. In the late 14th century and beyond, new generations of thinkers would build on this twin foundation.

- One French theologian and astrologer concluded that all religions were under astrological control and that it was therefore possible to predict religious change. Strikingly, he prophesied that the Antichrist would come in the year 1789—the year in which the French Revolution was in fact to begin, shattering the established structures of church and state across Europe.

- The most brilliant minds of the age were drawn to astrology. In the century before the Black Death, the scientist Roger Bacon had also begun to apply mathematics to astrology and apocalyptic thought.

- Bacon believed that the scientific study of the stars might allow him to predict when the next major religious sect would appear on earth. Bacon, and many of his contemporaries, believed that God acted through natural phenomena, including the movement of the stars.

- Many of the leading scientists of the plague years maintained that the Black Death was simultaneously part of a divine unfolding of history (moving toward the end times) and a natural phenomenon which could be studied scientifically.

- This was the line taken in the most famous scientific study of the causes of the plague: the report of the medical faculty of the University of Paris in 1348. Some of its passages reflect the apocalyptic tradition. At the same time, the doctors were also committed to identifying natural causes.

Reading

Eco, *The Name of the Rose*.
Falk, *The Light Ages*.
McGinn, *Visions of the End*.

Questions

1 True or false? Ideas of astrology and apocalypse were incompatible in medieval Europe.

2 True or false? In the century before the Black Death, the scientist Roger Bacon had begun to apply mathematics to astrology and apocalyptic thought.

Answers: 1 False; **2** True

13

Travel and Wanderlust: Sir John Mandeville

The book *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* was written around 1356, just half a dozen years after the plague had decimated Europe. In the first part of his book, the purported author, England's Sir John Mandeville, describes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. He then goes on to describe his travels as far as China and beyond. In the book, Mandeville never once mentions the plague—a characteristic he shares with many writers of the 14th century.

This lecture describes the book. At the outset, it's important to note that we shouldn't idealize Mandeville. He was far from being a modern multiculturalist. For instance, like far too many Christian men of his age, he harbored a particular mistrust for Judaism.

Mandeville's Views

- The ruling king of Mandeville's time, Edward III, loved the exotic and would have been an eager reader of Mandeville's travels. His taste for the exotic was closely linked with the hope of reviving the crusades.

- In 1291, the crusaders had lost the kingdom of Jerusalem. This surfaces prominently early in the book of Mandeville. "Unbelievers," he says, "have held [the Holy Land] seven score years and more—but by the grace of God they shall not keep it for long." Mandeville exhorts his readers to envision a new crusade against Islam.

- As the book develops, Mandeville appears to become increasingly sympathetic to other cultures and religious faiths. Christianity is always, for him, the supreme truth, but his book suggests a fascination with other cultures and sometimes an intense admiration for them.

- Borrowing from a late 13th-century source, he explains the parallels between Islam and Christianity. He also respects the toleration of Muslim societies toward Christians.

- In one passage of the book, Mandeville claims to have served the Egyptian sultan. Throughout this passage, admiration is the dominant tone. Mandeville portrays the sultan as a noble host.

Sir John Mandeville

- The host becomes the mouthpiece for a critique of Christian behavior, which Mandeville accepts. The sultan says,

> It is because of your sinfulness that you have lost all this land which we hold and keep. Because of your evil living and your sin and not because of our strength God has given it into our hands.

- As he eventually travels into Asia, Mandeville becomes exposed to more cultural differences. He draws heavily on the account of an Italian Franciscan friar while continuing to present the journey as if it were a first-person narrative. Unfortunately, there are descriptions in his account that are racist, including one of people near the Indus River.

Fiction and Fantasy

- The second half of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the part describing the world beyond the Holy Land, has far more fiction and fantasy than the first. For instance, in the Andaman Islands, in the Indian Ocean, there are depictions of gigantic people with only one eye in the middle of their foreheads, who eat raw meat and raw fish. Other people there have eyes in each shoulder.

- It's easy to see this as an extravagant orientalist fantasy: the kind of exoticism that, in later centuries at least, was often associated with empire building. The ghosts of earlier empires, too, flit in and out of his pages. Several passages feature the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great, whose empire had reached the Indian subcontinent.

- However, Mandeville was not an advocate of global, Western imperialism. After all, he was not living in an age when European culture had any realistic chance of global domination; Europe was very much on the margins.

Mandeville and Asian Cultures

- Europe, in the aftermath of the Black Death, was just one dynamic part of what we might call the developing world. The 14th-century imagination would have been electrified by the more urban economy of China. Mandeville describes Hangzhou as "the biggest city in the world," some 50 miles in circumference, with an astonishingly large number of people in it, and no fewer than 12,000 bridges.

- Mandeville's admiration reaches a high point in his description of the Great Khan of the Mongols, who rules over Cathay, or northern China. The Great Khan's palace is surrounded by luxuriant gardens and orchards; its great hall is built with pillars of gold and its walls are covered with dazzling red animal skins.

- The khan himself eats from a gold-trimmed table. On feast days, servants bring him mechanical peacocks and other birds, which can leap, dance, and flap their wings.

- Mandeville gradually moves farther away from the crusading sensibilities of the opening sections, presenting a more inclusive view of religion. Mandeville is drawn to the possibility that even the most distant religious traditions may glimpse the same truths that Christianity reveals—including the idea of an all-powerful creator.

Reading

Higgins, *Writing East.*
Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville.*

Questions

1 Which foreign leader did Mandeville, who claimed to have entered this leader's service, make the mouthpiece for a critique of contemporary Christian behavior?

- **a** The emperor of Mali
- **b** The caliph of Baghdad
- **c** The sultan of Egypt
- **d** Prester John

2 True or false? Mandeville expresses admiration for the religious toleration and cosmopolitanism of Chinese society.

Answers: 1 c; 2 True

Plague in the Islamic World

This lecture looks at the plague through the lens of how it affected the Islamic world. In Islamic Spain, Muslim-European culture proved resilient and showed sophisticated responses to the crisis. The same goes for the broader Muslim Mediterranean, too, considering the specular careers of scholars like Ibn Khaldun and the brilliant articulation of scientific theory all the way from Granada to Damascus.

Spread of the Plague

- Islamic theology emphasized the death of innocent people from disease and other disasters—like drowning, fires or earthquakes—as a means to achieving martyrdom. This was an approach taken by the chronicler al-Wardi, too, who described and considered the plague as it struck the Islamic world in his writing. The plague, he said, was a test sent by God.

- Al-Wardi would pass away from the plague on March 18, 1349. His account reminds us that the Black Death was a global pandemic, impacting the whole of Asia and large parts of Africa. It had arrived in the coastal plains of the eastern Mediterranean, including Lebanon and Syria, in the spring and summer of 1348.

- It devastated the empire of the Mamluks, the white male slave caste that had been recruited in the Caucasus and Russian steppes. The Mamluks had formed an oligarchy ruling Syria and Egypt since the year 1250. They had established a dynamic capital city in Cairo, which became the world's leading center of Islamic learning.

- In the Mamluk empire, as in Europe, one of the great tragedies of the Black Death was that it decimated a world that was thriving, both economically and intellectually. After fending off the Mongols at the beginning of the century, the Mamluks had overseen a period of prosperity. They tapped an economy based on the wealth of the Nile valley agriculture, and the Silk Route trade, to build some of the greatest monuments of the Islamic world in Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Aleppo.

- But just as in Florence and Siena, these cities were now brought to their knees. The plague eventually arrived in Baghdad and Mosul, in modern-day Iraq, and even in the holy city of Mecca itself, a fact which some saw as a sign of pollution by the presence of unbelievers.

- Across the Islamic world, scientific traditions were highly developed. Many Arabic thinkers accepted the theory that the plague was generated by means of a corruption of the air while maintaining that this was a result of God's will.

  - Some attempted to harmonize the scientific and religious traditions, and a good number accepted the theory of contagion.

  - One medical expert living in Damascus at the time of the Black Death drew attention to a hadith—a saying of the Prophet—that states "a sick person must not be in contact with one in good health."

Ibn Khaldun

- In its inexorable spread, the plague arrived in port cities along the Mediterranean shores of North Africa. It may also have begun to cross the Sahara Desert.

- One of the witnesses to the spread of the pandemic across northwest Africa was the philosopher and historian Ibn Khaldun. Born in Tunisia in 1332, Ibn Khaldun was descended from an aristocratic family. When the Black Death struck Tunisia, he would have been about 16.

- He lost many close family members. It is apparent that the trauma of the Black Death had left a lasting impact on Ibn Khaldun's intellectual imagination.

- We can trace its impact in the introduction he eventually wrote in the 1370s—the *Muqaddimah*—to an even more enormous history of the world. The pandemic crystallized his sense that he was living through a crisis of civilization.

- Ibn Khaldun's most original contribution was to envisage cyclical patterns in global events. He traces patterns that may still give us pause in the modern West.

  - Civilization, in his view, first emerged because of group solidarity, which allowed a dynasty to develop.

  - This brought urban growth and luxury production, but these carried within them the seeds of decay and disintegration.

  - The desire of the ruling dynasty to gain exclusive control brings conflict with the men on whose loyalty it relies.

- They turn to outside help for military sources and raise more taxes to do so, but they gradually lose control and are eventually replaced by an outside power.

- The decline of a dynasty, Ibn Khaldun explained, is hastened by injustice, and once it has set in, it cannot be warded off.

Granada

- Almost at the same time that the Black Death was arriving in the eastern Mediterranean, in the summer of 1348, it was making its first appearance on the western shores, in Spain. Here, it arrived in the Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Castile and in the mountainous Muslim kingdom of Granada. Against all the odds, Granada had clung on since the middle of the previous century in the face of its more powerful Christian enemies.

- The people of Granada—roughly 300,000 in number—imported grains from North Africa as well as from Castile. Until 1340, they regularly benefited from the military intervention of Berber dynasties from North Africa.

- That year, Christian armies won a decisive victory at the Battle of Rio Salado, which is normally seen as a tipping point—the beginning of the end of Islamic Spain. But this is much clearer in hindsight than it would have been at the time of the Black Death. For decades to come, Granada would remain a vibrant and dynamic—if religiously conservative—kingdom, even as it faced the greatest natural disaster in medieval European history.

- On June 1, 1348, the Black Death reached the city of Almería, the main port of the kingdom of Granada. By the end of that year, it arrived in the city of Granada itself, where the king's vizier was killed by the disease. In 1349, plague ravaged the royal armies as they faced down the Castilian ruler, Alfonso XI, who was besieging the stronghold of Gibraltar.

- Spiritual explanations proliferated. Some said the plague was a mercy from God, the community should remain steadfast, and Muslims had an obligation to treat the sick within the area that had been afflicted by plague. This responded partly to the fragility of the kingdom of Granada and its need to stay strong in the face of the Christian onslaught.

Ibn Khatima and al-Khatib

- From Andalusia came some of the most sophisticated scientific responses. One of them came from Ibn Khatima, a well-connected physician and poet from Almería. In his view, the plague was a malignant fever arising from the "morbidity of the internal temperament"—what we might call preexisting conditions—as well as from the corruption of the air. Ibn Khatima's description of the symptoms is informed by direct observation.

- "The fever is very often deadly," he writes, "accompanied by anxiety and localized sweats." On the second day, he says, one observes depression and disorientation. Then the fever climbs higher and is followed by cramps and other symptoms, among them the buboes and black boils, particularly on the back or the neck.

- Ibn Khatima accepts that the plague ultimately originates with God. But the fundamental cause, for him, is a corruption of the air which he associates with the bodies of the sick. Ibn Khatima's observations came with practical measures that could be taken to combat the plague, like getting plenty of fresh air and practicing positive thinking, joy, and serenity.

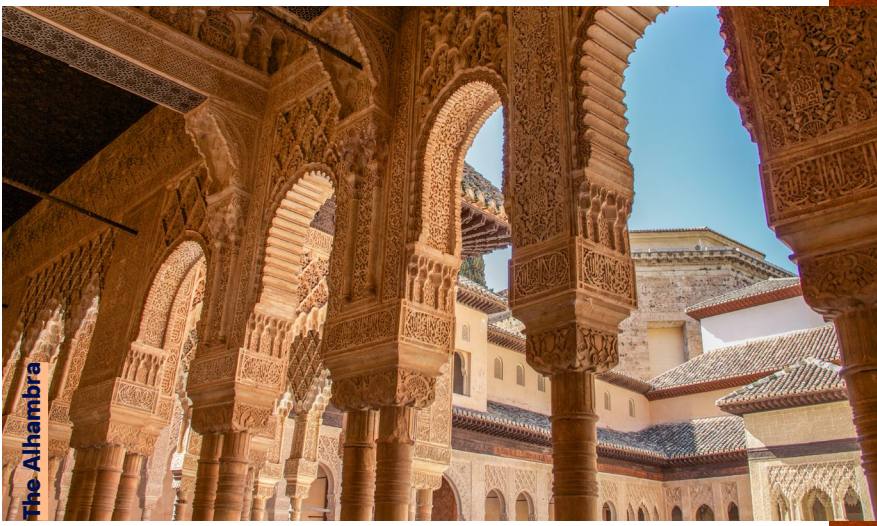
- Another notable medical expert of the time was Ibn Khatima's friend, the illustrious vizier al-Khatib, who was active in the court of Yusuf I, Granada's king. Al-Khatib warned, "The existence of contagion has been proved by experience, deduction, the senses, observation, and by unanimous reports." To ignore science was an affront to God, he stated, and to good Muslims. He pointed particularly to the contagious impact of pneumonic plague victims spitting up blood.

- Al-Khatib's championing of contagion theory led to a breakdown in relations with the religious authorities and ultimately to his exile in Fez (in Morocco) in the 1370s. His students adopted a more moderate tone, emphasizing God's role in bringing about the pandemic and allowing for medical knowledge.

In the Aftermath

- Al-Khatib's writing speaks to the vitality of intellectual culture at the court of Granada in the aftermath of the Black Death. This was similar to the resilience that showed up in so many western European Christian contexts in the late 14th century.

- For instance, during this period, the extraordinary palace of the Alhambra reached its pinnacle. It was under Muhammad V of Granada (who ruled until 1391) that the palace's Patio of the Lions was completed, along with many neighboring halls and chambers. Recent research suggests that the patio may have been a space for a madrasa (a religious school) supervised by the king and his vizier, al-Khatib.



The Alhambra

- Nearby, the Hall of Comares—sometimes known as the Hall of the Ambassadors—served as the throne room. It was here that, slightly more than a century later, Ferdinand and Isabella would hold an audience with Christopher Columbus. For now, the court of Granada would enjoy one last, spectacular flowering while Christian armies were held at bay.

- As for the longer-term effects of the plague elsewhere in the Islamic world, some historians have been optimistic in their assessment of the Mamluk empire of Egypt and Syria in the late 14th century. There was, they say, a period of growth in cities like Damascus, Cairo, and Aleppo, which was reversed only at the end of the century. However, across the Muslim world, just as in Christendom, the plague itself would prove remarkably resilient.

Reading

Aberth, *The Black Death*.
Irwin, *The Alhambra*.
———, *Ibn Khaldun*.

Questions

1 Who ruled Egypt and Syria (both of which were devastated by the plague) in the 14th century?

a The Abbasids
b The Fatimids
c The Mamluks
d The crusaders

2 What great palace in the city of Granada bears witness to the cultural resilience of Islamic Spain in the generations after the plague?

a The Palacio Real
b The Alhambra
c The Generalife

Answers: 1 c; 2 b

Jewish Experiences of the Black Death

In the middle of the 1340s, the small Catalan town of Tàrrega, nestled beneath the Pyrenees mountains, had a Jewish community of several hundred people out of a population of 5,000. Sadly, the summer of 1348 saw the arrival of a devastating wave of a new disease and violent attacks on Jews.

The traumatized survivors would later attempt to put their experience into the words in a letter to the king: "With armed hand and deliberate intent, [the Christians of Tàrrega had come] maliciously to the Jewish community," the survivors remember. A Jewish chronicler writes that some 300 people had been killed and that their bodies had then been dragged to an empty cistern.

Background Information

- The violence in Tàrrega was not isolated. There were killings in Barcelona, and other smaller towns in the region. The story of Tàrrega is just one chapter in a much broader story of persecution. However, the story of Jewish people in the 14th century includes some striking cases of cultural resilience and even resistance.

- Across much of western Europe, Jewish communities had survived—and sometimes prospered—in the first half of the century. In retrospect, though, we can see warning signals.

  - England had expelled its small Jewish population back in 1290. France—where there was a much larger Jewish community of around 100,000 at the start of the century—had done so twice, in 1306 and again in 1322.

  - Many had gone into exile in the Rhineland or across the Pyrenees in Catalonia. Communities in the south of France had faced deadly attacks by Christian militants calling themselves the Shepherds, or the Pastoureaux.

- In cities like Seville, Valencia, Toledo, and Barcelona, as well as hundreds of smaller towns like Tàrrega, the Jewish community of Spain was thriving. There were about 150,000 Jews in the Christian Spanish kingdoms and another 40,000 in Portugal.

- Meanwhile, in Germany, there were well-established Ashkenazi communities in places like Cologne, Metz, and Mainz. There were also many newer Jewish communities, although they were already facing increasing discrimination.

- Some of them were under the nominal protection of the Holy Roman emperor, who exploited his role to raise new taxes. In the prosperous town of Colmar—whose wealth derived from wine production—the emperor had intervened directly with an army to protect the Jews back in 1338.

- The Jews of Colmar had been doing well. Their numbers had been swollen by exiles expelled from France, and they had completed their new synagogue in 1328. Their rich, multilingual culture is preserved in remarkable treasures.

- Their treasures were hidden in great haste when, in the cold winter of 1348/1349, their powerful neighbors turned against them. A wave of persecution that had begun in Provence and Catalonia spread across the Rhineland, Switzerland, and Germany in the fall of 1348.

Eruptions of Violence

- Across much of western Europe, an almost entirely new pathology took hold: the notion that Jews were conspiring to poison the wells on which Christians relied and were therefore responsible for the massive scale of deaths. The results were appalling.

- A later 14th-century chronicler describing events in the Rhineland recounts that in early 1349, "the Bishop and the lords and the Imperial Cities agreed to do away with the Jews." The chronicler goes on to write that "wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned."

- A few Rhineland Jews may have escaped to Spain or elsewhere in the Mediterranean—but only a few. In Strasbourg, according to one account, it took six days to burn the Jews because of their large numbers. The Jewish community of nearby Colmar was put to death in January 1349, just outside the city walls. There was no permanent Jewish community there ever again in the Middle Ages.

- This was not simply a matter of spontaneous mass violence, or even a form of class revolt against wealthy Jewish elites. The killing of Jews en masse often involved local elites and was systematically coordinated. There are multiple passages in Christian sources that suggest that mass extermination

was a widespread aspiration. The modern term *genocide* is surely applicable to these events.

- This genocide was a profound and lasting emotional shock for the Jewish communities of Germany. In the aftermath, there was a significant movement of Ashkenazi Jews to eastern Europe, including Poland and Hungary.

Jewish Doctors

- Jewish history during and after the Black Death involved significant amounts of resiliency. For instance, there were Jewish doctors, as well as Christians and Muslims, who were actively involved in attempting to counteract the plague, particularly in Spain and southern France.

- There were translations of Christian medical treatises into Hebrew and original Hebrew tracts. One was modeled closely on the Arabic expertise of Ibn Khatimah, the physician and poet from Almería. Arabic medical manuscripts circulated widely among Spanish Jews.

- Perhaps the most prominent Jewish physician was Abraham Caslari, author of the *Tractate on Pestilential and Other Types of Fevers*, which appeared at the height of the Black Death in 1349. Caslari was based in Besalú, near Girona, but was originally from the south of France, He, his wife, and his father had been forced to leave Narbonne (in France) in 1306, in the face of a wave of anti-Semitism.

- Controversially, he maintained that the plague was not a universal pestilence caused by factors like the position of the planets. Instead, he said, it involved a corruption of the individual body, catalyzed by immediate causes such as poor diet. More than others, he therefore believed that the disease could be treated effectively by human means.

- Caslari's treatise was also written against the backdrop of the devastating anti-Semitic attacks in Tàrrega and other parts of Catalonia. In his prose, there are oblique allusions to this violence.

Resilience and Resistance

- In the centuries that followed, it was resilience and resistance that Jews often prized. For instance, the 17th-century writer Yuzpa Shammes, who had lived in the city of Worms in Germany, tells a tale of armed Jewish resistance during the persecutions that accompanied the Black Death.

- According to his account, just before the entire Jewish community is killed, falsely accused of poisoning the wells, the community leaders preemptively attack the Christian magistrates in the town hall, stabbing them to death. Others fight in the streets and set the town on fire. The Jewish community dies, but not without putting up a ferocious fight.

- Of course, the story may reflect later realities, including the more recent destruction of the Jewish community in the 17th century. But if there are elements of the story that gained in the telling, there may also be seeds of truth. Yuzpa Shammes originally came from the German town of Fulda, where there is a similar tale of Jewish armed resistance.

Survival

- The tragedies that befell the Jews of northern Europe were not uniformly paralleled everywhere else. Many Jews coming from Germany and France were able to find sanctuary in Italy, for instance. Jewish moneylenders had been invited to settle in Siena in 1309. There was a Jewish influx in places like Verona and Ferrara, too, as well as smaller towns like Pitigliano, which came to be known as Little Jerusalem.

- There was some resistance in Florence, where Jewish bankers were welcomed only in 1427, but in Bologna, there were more than 20 Jewish banking families by the end of the 15th century. In southern Italy, small Jewish communities were scattered across roughly 150 towns, comprising a total population of around 50,000 by the end of the 15th century.

- The epicenter of medieval Jewish life in western Europe was Spain. This lecture opened with an account of devastating violence in Tàrrega. Even here, as the scholar Susan Einbinder has noted, there were signs of resilience. It was, after all, survivors who returned to bury the dead. The Jewish quarter would at least recover.

Conclusion

- The Jewish community of Toledo also had to bury many of its own. We have a record of more than 20 epitaphs for Jewish victims of the Black Death there; they were originally inscribed on gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Toledo, although only a small number of the stones themselves survive. Among them is a heartbreaking epitaph for a 15-year-old boy named Asher, who was one of the youngest victims to be commemorated in this way. The text reads in part of a father who "is pained and pining."

- The trauma is undeniable. Yet as Susan Einbinder argues, the language of these lamentations is conventional in its time. Not even the Black Death could destroy the power of that language to bring peace and consolation to the community.

- Toledo temporarily escaped the violence that arrived in places like Tàrrega and Barcelona. Here, at least, the plague did not mark a transformative moment. In the memory of Castilian Jews, the Black Death did not mark a definitive watershed. The tombstones of Toledo are one more sign of that familiar spirit of resistance, a marker of resilience through a search for spiritual meaning.

- In the history of Iberian Jews, this tipping would need to wait at least until the end of the century. In 1391, anti-Semitic preaching in the Andalusian city of Seville catalyzed a wave of pogroms that spread all along the eastern seaboard of Spain and even to the island of Mallorca.

- New scholarship suggests that the pogroms of 1391 were driven by specific economic factors more than by timeless religious hatreds. Yet for many scholars, they did mark the beginning of a new and much more conflictive phase in the relationship between Spanish Christians and Jews.

- Two decades after the pogroms, Saint Vincent Ferrer delivered a fiery sermon against the Jews of Toledo. He then rushed into the main synagogue and, rededicating it to the Virgin Mary, consecrated it as Santa María la Blanca. A wave of forced conversions was to follow.

- Ironically, these conversions would stimulate fears among Spanish Christians that the church was being corrupted from within by the new converts, known as the conversos or marranos. These fears would eventually lead to the creation of the Spanish Inquisition by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1478.

- Some Jewish communities in Spain continued to flourish right up until the end of the 15th century. Yet in 1492, it became clear that there would now be a definitive expulsion of the Jews from Spain. This was the dawn of modernity: an age that would arguably prove much more intolerant than the Middle Ages had ever been.

Reading

Boehm, *The Colmar Treasure*.
Einbinder, *After the Black Death*.
Horrox, *The Black Death*.

Questions

1 True or false? After the plague, there was no permanent Jewish community in Colmar ever again in the Middle Ages.

2 In which medieval Spanish city are there Jewish tombstone epitaphs that provide evidence of cultural resilience as well as traumatic loss?

a Santiago de Compostela
b Toledo
c Madrid
d Granada

Answers: 1 True; **2** b

16

Revolution in Rome: Cola di Rienzo

High in the mountains to the northeast of Rome, among the meadows of the Abruzzi region, a revolutionary leader was in hiding. It was the summer of 1348. Niccolo di Rienzo, who was in his mid-30s, had disguised himself as a friar, specifically one of the idealistic Spiritual Franciscans known as the Fraticelli—the Little Brothers. Niccolo, commonly known by his nickname Cola, was living in fear of his life: His archenemies, the powerful barons whose fortresses dominated the skyline of Rome, were out to get him following a revolution he had previously led.

Background on the Situation

- Cola was supported by a very broad sector of public opinion that was hostile to the feudal barons. He had been carried to power on the back of a wave of popular discontent; the movement was, at root, a people's revolution. Across western Europe, the thirst for liberty (and political representation) was intense in this period.


Cola di Rienzo

- Cola had been born in 1312 into a working-class neighborhood in Rome. At that time, it was a small city of some 35,000 (a tiny shell of its ancient self). Cola's father was a tavern keeper. His mother was a maid named Matalena.

- He had gone on to train as a notary. He had married up, getting engaged to a young woman with the refined ancient name of Livia. He probably attended Petrarch's coronation as poet laureate in Rome in 1341, an event that helped to advance the dream of restoring the city to something like its former glory.

- Cola had become obsessed with this dream. As an emissary to the papal court—then living in happy self-exile in the southern French city of Avignon—he attempted to persuade Clement VI to return to Rome.

- He and his supporters hoped to initiate a new regime: a new spiritual age in the history of humanity. Deeply influenced by apocalyptic theory, Cola had envisioned his movement as one that would usher in divine victory over the forces of Satan, bringing consolation to the oppressed people of Rome and, ultimately, all Christendom. It was this victory that he had attempted to enact in his 1347 revolution.

Events of 1347–1348

- By the time of the plague in 1348, the wheel of fortune had begun to turn. After an initial period of shock, the barons had mobilized against Cola. Toward the end of 1347, they had forced him to step down from the new office that he had created for himself—the position of tribune.

- Cola's fate had been sealed by a break with the papacy. Clement VI had come to see Cola's rise as a threat to the church's authority and had actively collaborated in undermining him. Having fallen from power, or rather, having been pushed, Cola had been escorted secretly out of Rome in January 1348.

- He had first made his way down to the bustling, cosmopolitan city of Naples. But in May that year, Cola found himself pursued by a new and equally dangerous enemy: the plague. One chronicler estimated that it killed some 63,000 out of a population of 100,000 in the city of Naples. Cola, already on the run, was forced up into the mountainous region of the Abruzzi.

- Here too, in the city of L'Aquila, the mortality rate had been extremely high: some 65%. But up in the higher mountain peaks, Cola would have been safer from all his enemies. He had settled in among the genuine friars living there. He had survived, although his dreams of a people's revolution appeared to have been crushed.

Discontent

- The wave of discontent that had swept Cola to power had seemingly retreated, but in Rome and far beyond, it would be followed by others. The expert Samuel Cohn has discovered more than 500 revolts between 1355 and the beginning of the next century. Cohn posits that demand for liberty increased radically in this period.

- By the 1370s, Italian rebels, perhaps inspired by Cola, had created a new flag: a banner with the word *Libertas* (meaning "Freedom") stitched in gold letters. Contemporaries were aware that the demand for change was in the air, whether they were happy about it or not.

- From the end of the previous century, the grip of the old feudal magnates had begun to slip in a number of Italian cities and towns, including Florence. As early as 1250, the rising bourgeoisie of Florence had begun to chafe at the tax burden imposed by the magnates, and they had successfully sought political reform through armed rebellion.

- This middle-class urban revolt was accompanied by a rising tide of resistance to social inequality in more rural regions. The most notable of these took place in the foothills of the Alps between 1305 and 1307 and was led by another leader immersed in the teachings of the Spiritual Franciscans: a man named Fra Dolcino.

- The terror his sect, the Dolcinites, provoked is reflected in our sources, which are unremittingly hostile and which give the impression of purposeless violence and savagery. In the Dolcinite rebellion, we can trace some of the same features we later find in the urban revolution of Cola di Rienzo, including an aspiration to social justice, a willingness to use violence, an intermingling of religious ideals and secular agendas, and a radical emphasis on the corrupting power of wealth.

- Eventually, Fra Dolcino was captured alongside his companion Margherita, and many of his followers were burned at the stake. This exceptionally repressive violence was not typical of most medieval revolts and reflects the unusual threat that the Dolcinites posed.

Plague and Revolution

- In the decades before the Black Death, social pressure had begun to mount. In cities like Siena and Florence, food shortages catalyzed revolts. But resistance was not simply a spontaneous expression of anger at injustice.

- There was also a growing political organization among the Italian working classes. In Florence, craftsmen had begun a club—an important mechanism of solidarity and cohesion. By 1345, a man named Ciuto Brandini had organized a union of wool workers.

- The plague years, 1348–1352, brought a temporary lull in proceedings. But then, from the mid-1350s onward, there was a veritable explosion of popular revolt across western Europe: from Italy north to France, Flanders, and England.

- One day in mid-February 1353, the city of Rome was again suddenly convulsed. A huge crowd pillaged the senatorial palace, making off with the barons' horses. In the ensuing violence, a member of the powerful Orsini family was stoned to death. Eventually, on September 14, the people overthrew the senators and elected a new tribune, Francesco Baroncelli, who had been among Cola's earliest supporters.

Cola's Return and Downfall

- Cola, for his part, was in prison, having been imprisoned by the pope in Avignon following a series of complicated events, including one prior imprisonment and release. (An important source here is an anonymous chronicler known as the Anonimo Romano.)

- In June 1350, still in hiding, he had been approached by a much-revered friar named Fra Angelo. This friar had convinced Cola to take up the cause of revolution once more.

- He had then traveled to the court of the man he hoped would oversee this revolution: the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV, king of Bohemia. Charles's court was in Prague, a city that he rebuilt and re-created. After initially welcoming Cola, the emperor changed his mind and had him imprisoned in harsh conditions north of Prague. The experience transformed Cola's appearance; he became aged, emaciated, and malnourished.

- After many months, he had been freed, and was able to make another high-stakes journey to plead his case to the pope. However, Clement VI had become hostile to Cola. Arriving in Avignon, Cola had been imprisoned again, albeit this time with somewhat more bodily comforts. He had begun to prepare his legal defense and turned his back on the teachings of Fra Angelo.

- However, Clement VI suddenly died in December 1352. His successor, an elderly French cardinal who now became Innocent VI, had a quite different sense of Cola's value.

- Innocent VI was determined to reclaim his authority in Italy, to put an end to the violence of the barons in Rome, and to stop the anarchy that had followed Cola's fall from power. In September 1353, he released Cola, even granting him 200 florins to subsidize his return to Italy. From a papal perspective, Cola was to be an instrument in the reconquest of Italy from the barons.

- On August 1, 1354, Cola made the dramatic reentry he had long planned: a moment of high political theater that saw him greeted by the people. He delivered a great oration comparing himself with the biblical king Nebuchadnezzar, who had wandered in exile for seven years before returning to his realm. Cola said he intended to transform the government of Rome once again.

- However, the people of Rome had engineered their own revolution without waiting for Cola—or anyone else—to command them. There was tension between an authoritarian revolutionary leader and the will of the Roman people. Reportedly, the people's response to him was cold and fearful.

- Events culminated in the dramatic death of the leader. A crowd reportedly burned his palace and pelted him with projectiles. He tried to flee, but the crowd captured and brutally executed him. His body was hung up, horribly mutilated, and eventually burned.

- Cola's revolution had been reduced, quite literally, to ashes. But in the years and decades to come, the struggle against the barons would continue. The pope would continue his attempt to reconquer Italy, undercutting the power of great magnates, and the tidal wave of popular revolt would spread, reaching far across the Alps. By the late 1350s, the fields of France were also in flames.

Reading

Chronicle of an Anonymous Roman.
Cohn, *Lust for Liberty*.
Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome*.

Questions

1 True or false? Cola di Rienzo was born into the Italian nobility.

2 Cola sought help from a powerful ruler who he thought might save Christendom and who shared his apocalyptic ideas. Who was this ruler, and where was his court based?

a Edward III, king of England; London

b Charles IV, king of Bohemia; Prague

c Clement VI, pope; Avignon

d Pedro the Cruel, king of Castile; Seville

Answers: 1 False; 2 b

17

Uprising in France: The Jacquerie

Ten years after the first great wave of plague in Europe, according to one witness named Jean Le Bel, "a mysterious new affliction broke out in many parts of the realm of France." This affliction was not a biological disease. Rather, it was a social crisis. Certain leaderless people had risen up in revolt, said the chronicler. The uprising soon came to be known as the Jacquerie: a reference to the massed ranks of common men or foot soldiers whom the social elites referred to, contemptuously, as Jacques Bonhommes (or Jack Goodfellow).

The Situation in France

- In the 1350s, the kingdom of France entered a deep crisis. In the Battle of Poitiers, in 1356, the French king Jean II had been captured along with the cream of the French aristocracy. The English were holding him for ransom. He would remain in England until a peace treaty was negotiated in 1360.

- Meanwhile, Jean II had been replaced by his teenage son Charles. This was the future Charles V. Charles's political skills at this stage were minimal. The Estates-General (an assembly of clergymen, nobles, and townsmen) had begun to meet in Paris and were asserting their right to shape policy on behalf of the people.

- Tensions between the Estates-General and Charles exploded in February 1358. A group of Parisians had gathered under the leadership of a wealthy merchant named Étienne Marcel.

- This group had then assassinated two of the king's closest advisors in his private chambers. Charles mobilized the nobility of northern France, aiming to retake Paris. He had fortified castles and towns surrounding the city and attempted to cut off supply lines.

- By March, the kingdom was already on the brink of civil war. Now came a wave of armed rebellion. This was a new expression of the people's desire for liberty that historians have traced to the two generations after the Black Death.

- The rebellion seems to have exploded after a fracas on the Oise River, at a place near Chantilly. Many noblemen were killed in this incident, and the conflagration quickly spread. Le Bel presents the rebels as uncontrollably violent, committing brutal attacks on castle after castle, though we need to be skeptical of colorful accounts like Le Bel's.

- We find similar views being expressed in a chronicle written by Jean Froissart, a French-speaker from the Low Countries. This was, he says, a rampage led by wicked people. The illuminations in manuscripts of Froissart's chronicles are particularly vivid.

The Rebellious

- But who were these so-called wicked people? A closer look at the sources reveals that this was, in fact, far from being a spontaneous orgy of violence committed by a blood-crazed mob.

- Records speak of a revolutionary leader known as Guillaume Calle, an articulate man. Guillaume was clearly literate because he is known to have written letters to the provost of Paris, Étienne Marcel.

- The historian Justine Firnhaber-Baker—a leading expert on the Jacquerie—suggests that Guillaume Calle and the regional captains that he commanded were men of some wealth, drawn from a relatively prosperous class of rural artisans and landowners. The captains generally had some education and legal knowledge, too, and a number of them had military experience.

- Ordinary peasants were the heart and soul of the Jacquerie. Many were from very humble backgrounds, belonging to the rural working classes. Some of them, during the rebellion, refused to attack people who were not noble, defying the orders of their superiors.

Motivations

- Why had they been driven to rebellion? Most historians currently agree that the Jacquerie, far from being an outbreak of wicked, primal violence, had something to do with the pestilence that had devastated the world a decade earlier.

- A shrunken tax base, coupled with the ongoing need to wage war, created tensions between the nobility and the French populace. Although the rebels didn't explicitly mention taxation, Justine Firnhaber-Baker (for one) has suggested that we should see the Black Death as an important indirect cause.

- The effects of the plague were exacerbated by military conflict with England, which would come to be known as the Hundred Years' War. The war was going very badly for the French in the 1350s. Many people in the countryside felt that the nobility had failed to protect the kingdom.

- Another factor involved the urban elites in Paris. Paris was the capital of what had once been, before the start of the war, the richest kingdom in Europe. Some of the most powerful nobles in the realm lived in the city, as did a wealthy commercial class, at whose head was the rebellious Étienne Marcel.

- These people had little in common with the rural rebels. Still, in the spring of 1358, their interests temporarily coincided with those of the peasants.

- Months later, Charles would issue a letter of remission to the city: a pardon for the crimes committed against the crown, granted for an appropriate sum of money. The letter gives us a good sense of what exactly it was that the Parisians had done. A great many of them, the prince suggested, had conspired against the royalty to turn leadership over "to the king of Navarre [and] to make an alliance with him."

- For their part, the wealthy urban rebels had gathered in assemblies organized by Étienne Marcel. They'd sent the king insulting letters, they had seized his palace at the Louvre, and they had minted their own money. We read that they "have torn down and burned many castles, fortresses, and other homes of nobles."

- What, then, was the relationship between Paris and the rebellion in the countryside? There was direct contact: Étienne Marcel wrote to rebels in the countryside, and the rebels gave him armed support. Still, this was a pragmatic, temporary convergence of interests between two separate groups of rebels. Étienne held the peasants in low esteem and washed his hands of them as quickly as he could when things began to go downhill.

- The real importance of the collaboration between the peasants and the merchants of Paris was ideological. It was partly in Paris that ideas of community self-defense had first been hatched: the idea that communities had the right to defend themselves by force. The Estates-General had been making this case for years, in the capital, and these ideas had now begun to circulate among the peasants.

Conclusion

- Just a few weeks after the uprising had begun, the king of Navarre invited the rebel leader Guillaume Calle for a meetup. Once Guillaume was in the palm of the king's hand, he was immediately arrested, and the king of Navarre attacked the rebel forces.

- Neither he nor Étienne Marcel had genuinely respected the wishes of the peasants; this had been a marriage of convenience. Eventually, class solidarity kicked in.

- By the end of June 1358, the French nobility had stifled the rebellion, brutally and completely. Men-at-arms successfully faced down the peasants and butchered them.

- Throughout July, the nobility carried out reprisals so violent that the French crown needed to issue them with pardons. Étienne Marcel was executed on the last day of the month, and in August the French prince, the Dauphin, marched into Paris. The strange affliction of peasant rebellion had been cauterized. To heal the kingdom, or perhaps merely to paper over the wounds, hundreds of letters of pardon were issued in the following months.

- For France, the road to recovery from the plague was anything but simple. Its king—John II—was still being held for ransom by the English. Following the plague, it had been ravaged a second time by the uprising.

- The struggle for freedom in France had ended in execution and bloody vengeance. But elsewhere, the struggle continued and now began to gather steam. England, too, was about to erupt in rebellion.

Reading

Cohn, *Popular Protest in Late-Medieval Europe*.
Firnhaber-Baker, *The Jacquerie of 1358*.

Questions

1 At the time of the Jacquerie, where was King Jean II of France, leaving his inexperienced son Charles in control of the affairs of the kingdom?

- **a** In captivity in England
- **b** In battle against the Navarrese
- **c** On crusade to Jerusalem
- **d** On pilgrimage to Santiago

2 One important factor in explaining the timing and the extent of the revolt was the involvement of discontented Parisian elites. What was the name of the leader of the Parisians?

- **a** Étienne Gilson
- **b** Étienne de Bourbon
- **c** Marcel Marceau
- **d** Étienne Marcel

Answers: 1 a; 2 d

18

England: The Black Death and Economic Change

In England, one of the most counterintuitive developments of the 14th century was that, in purely economic terms, the plague was a blessing in disguise for many of the survivors. This is not to deny the trauma that they had experienced. That trauma was so deep as to be unspeakable. But after a few years of painful economic turbulence in the wake of the Black Death, standards of living improved significantly for many English people.

An Unstable Situation

- At the beginning of the 14th century, many parts of Europe had been experiencing a growing economic crisis. The evidence is best for England, although this story may have been replicated in many other parts of the continent. The country had been very densely populated. Rents had been high, and wages were low.

- Around the year 1300, millions of English people—perhaps 2 million out of a total population of about 5 million—had been bound by serfdom. Serfs were unable to move without the lord's consent, unable to marry or buy or sell property, and at least in theory were subject to the labor service

on the lord's demesne—the land the lord kept under direct control. This was a society in which one catastrophic harvest failure could send families over the brink into starvation and famine.

- Some historians have suggested that cracks were already starting to appear in the edifice of serfdom before the Black Death. Labor services were starting to decline, and lords had started to loosen the ties that kept peasants bound to the land. Still, before the plague, most peasants had been poor, vulnerable, and chronically underfed, with a particular shortage of animal protein.

Boom Times in the *Tales*

In *The Canterbury Tales*, among the pilgrims Geoffrey Chaucer describes are some urban craftsmen: a haberdasher, a carpenter, a weaver, a dyer, and a tapestry maker. Many of these men were associated with the textile industry, which was experiencing a boom. Unlike the other pilgrims, they are not actually named, or given any kind of individual description. What seems to matter to Chaucer is their collective upward mobility. In his own life, Chaucer rose socially, too. He eventually attained the prominent post of controller of the wool custom in the 1370s.

Short-Term Effects of the Plague

- The Black Death had quite an impact on the medieval English economy. There was a cataclysmic fall in the population, from about 5 million beforehand to about 2.5 million after the plague. Some of the immediate economic effects were awful.

- In some parts of England, there was an acute labor shortage in the early years during and after the first outbreak of plague. Conservative observers pointed to a supposedly malicious or lazy refusal to work, but we can imagine a traumatized population finding it difficult to adjust to the loss of half their families and to adapt to new circumstances.

- In the short term, there would have been major transportation difficulties, as roads fell into disrepair. Serious administrative problems came up as well. Many manors in England kept no records for months on end. Much of the arable land fell into disuse, too.

Resilience after the Plague

- Despite the immediate effects of the plague, in the medium and long term, the English economy proved resilient. One adjustment that landowners made was to move toward livestock and dairy farming, rabbit farming, and sheep farming. All of these required a relatively limited labor force.

- There was also a major expansion in the English textile sector between the 1350s and the end of the century. This wasn't just a boom in London, either. It was also good news for regional market towns. Places like Colchester, in the county of Essex, were now able to move onward and upward.

- Another important English industry was tin mining. The heart of this industry was the county of Cornwall, in the extreme southwest. After the Black Death, the tin mines were at first hit hard. However, the Cornish tin industry recovered completely by the end of the century.

Changes to Serfdom

- Meanwhile, there were positive shifts occurring in the relationship between English lords and their peasants. Mark Bailey has described the third quarter of the 14th century as an age of "profound and irreversible changes in human conditions."

- Serfdom, or villeinage as it is sometimes known, was significantly corroded in the new labor market, in which there was a new shortage of manpower.

- Peasants could move away from oppressive working conditions or buy their freedom. There were far fewer serfs by the end of the century.

The Overall Picture

- It's important not to paint an overly glowing picture of England during this period. Its urban economy remained much smaller than that of northern Italy, for instance. And across England, some villages were abandoned after the Black Death, never to be repopulated.

- But abandoned villages were relatively few and far between, and they had tended to be very small, vulnerable communities. The hidden picture is that depopulation and abandonment of some impoverished rural areas meant that new economic opportunities were opening up elsewhere in the countryside. Medieval textile towns drew young people away.

- Economic historians have calculated that there was an increase in wages of about 40% in the half century after the Black Death. We can trace this upwardly mobile world in new dietary habits.

  - As the historian Christopher Dyer has shown, before the Black Death, most peasants had lived on a basic cereal-based diet in which barley and rye were commonly consumed by boiling them in stews known as pottages.

- Afterward, wheat consumption increased (gradually replacing barley and rye), and peasants baked more bread instead of eating it in pottages. More and more houses acquired their own individual ovens instead of depending on common ovens.

- People ate more meat, too. By the end of the century, harvest workers were allowed a pound of meat for every two pounds of bread, compared with only an ounce or two of meat back in the 13th century.

✶ Clothing changed as well. After the Black Death, there were major changes in fashion across all social ranks, as courtly style spread through the rest of society.

- Courtly fashion would reach great heights of sophistication in the late Middle Ages.

- Even among the peasant class, the male tunic became shorter and closer fitting. Peasants could afford to buy more colorful fabrics, with bright blues and greens replacing simpler whites and russets.

- Peasant women could wear silver buckles and ornaments. Women's clothing became tighter, too.

Reactions

✶ Some commentators suggested that it was this spirit of self-indulgence that had provoked the fury of God, who had sent down the plague to punish humanity for its pride. Men and women alike had started to dress in a way that—in their eyes—was diabolical: They resembled demons, said the churchmen, rather than people.

- This conservative reaction was not necessarily typical of 14th-century attitudes. The complaints are important precisely because they betray the emergence of a new consumer culture in which women as well as men were participating.

- This provoked hostility among many churchmen and a moral panic in some sectors of the social elite, who sensed that their social dominance was being eroded. After the Black Death, the English Parliament issued a series of sumptuary laws regulating clothing. These statutes stipulated in detail precisely who could wear what, including which social groups were entitled to wear certain colors and which kinds of fabric and fur they could use.

- Clothing was just the tip of an ethical iceberg. For moralists of the day and sometimes for fiction writers, this was a new age of greed and avarice.

- In the introduction of the *Decameron*, which helped inspire *The Canterbury Tales*, Giovanni Boccaccio makes a damning observation. In the wake of the plague, he says, countless numbers of people became dependent on what he calls "the greed of servants, who remained in short supply." These people, he adds, were "men and women of coarse intellect." Here, Boccaccio reveals his true colors: his liking for the life of the court, which he had experienced in Naples, and the world of the Florentine *bourgeoisie.*

- Boccaccio's tirade against the unwashed Italian masses is matched in a number of English documents. For the bishop of Rochester, a town in Kent, the English were the worst offenders of all: a lazy, overfed, lecherous bunch. In his view, "Where there is sloth, there is every other evil as well. … There is no nation under heaven as ill-famed as the English."

- The archbishop of Canterbury issued vitriolic condemnations of greed in the wake of the plague. In 1350, Archbishop Simon Islip issued a document aiming to fix the salaries of clergymen without a benefice (a permanent church appointment) at pre-plague levels. A generation later,

in 1378, a new archbishop reluctantly bowed to the inevitable, raising the wages of the country priests who, he fumed, had been infected with the sin of greed.

- For conservative churchmen, money was evil because it led to ruthless greed and violated their duty to friends. But from our vantage point in the modern age, we can detect something else. In England, the Black Death had catalyzed the emergence of a new, modern, capitalist economy: a world ruled by money.

- The country would explode, though, in the hot summer of 1381, as the common people decided to rise in violent protest. That topic is covered in the next lecture.

Questions

1 Chaucer, son of a wine importer, exemplifies a broad story of upward social mobility in the late 14th century. What position did he occupy in the 1370s?

a Chancellor of the exchequer

b Controller of the wool custom

c Speaker of the House of Commons

d Lord mayor of London

2 True or false? Serfdom, or villeinage as it is sometimes known, was significantly corroded after the Black Death.

Answers: 1 b; **2** True

The Peasants' Revolt: England 1381

Three decades after the plague, the year 1381 saw the event usually known as the Peasants' Revolt, which some historians now call the English Rising. The revolt marked the crest of a tidal wave of popular struggles in Europe, born of a quest to transform the world here and now.

Rebel Texts

- For the Peasants' Revolt, we have a remarkable source: half a dozen brief but stirring texts apparently written by rebel leaders, preparing their audience for an uprising. In one of the rebel texts, a leader calling himself Jack Milner (or Miller) asks for help fixing his mill, specifically in setting its four sails in proper order. These sails are in effect four components of the struggle for justice: right, might, skill, and will.

- A second leader exhorts his followers to carry out fearlessly the task they have begun: "If the end be well, then all is well." Invoking a spirit of solidarity, this leader, who assumes the name Jack Carter (a carter is someone who transports goods by cart), promises that he will provide meat and drink, so that no one shall go empty-handed. He and a third Jack—Jack Trewman—both assure readers and listeners: "Now is the time."

- Ironically, these texts have come down to us because they were integrated into two hostile accounts written by the chroniclers Henry Knighton and Thomas Walsingham.

  - Notably, the ending of Knighton's account includes some words by a radical rebel priest, John Ball, which echo the rhetoric of the three Jacks.

  - Walsingham clearly sees John Ball as the ringleader, claiming he had "sent a certain letter, full of obscurities, to the leaders of the commons … encouraging them to finish what they had begun."

  - Most historians have followed their medieval counterparts in seeing Ball as the leader and perhaps the only actual author of these rebel texts. However, it's possible that these ideas were circulating widely among a circle of rebels.

Freedom from Serfdom

- The Peasants' Revolt has long been understood as a symbolic high point in the struggle for freedom from serfdom. However, there is more and more evidence that serfdom had already begun to decline long before 1381. Despite that evidence, in all the chronicles, the demand for freedom is heard over and over before, during, and after the Peasants' Revolt.

- Even if the reality of serfdom had begun to decline, the idea remained loathsome and symbolically powerful. This was the ideological framework that shaped the revolt. If cracks had begun to appear in the regime of servitude, now was the time—as the rebel leaders put it—for an all-out assault on the social hierarchy.

- It was John Ball's words, according to the chronicler Jean Froissart, that set the country ablaze. People developed a "great envy at them that were rich, and such as were noble."

Political Grievances

- The very existence of serfdom may have come to seem even more offensive at a time when more English people had begun to glimpse the possibility of enjoying some modest financial security. Yet the words that follow, in Froissart's chronicle, remind us that it would be a mistake to reduce the Peasants' Revolt to one single factor.

- There were also political grievances. People had begun to speak among themselves, says the chronicler, about how the realm of England was being governed in an evil way. Hostility to the king's ministers had been mounting since the middle of the 1370s. Foremost among them was John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster.


John of Gaunt

- Gaunt was widely seen as a corrupt man, taking advantage of his elderly father King Edward III. The so-called Good Parliament of 1376 had impeached a number of his protégés—the earliest ever recorded cases of impeachment. Shortly after that, King Edward's hereditary successor and eldest son, the Black Prince, fell sick and died, leaving the kingdom in political crisis.

- Throughout this storm, the king had been presumed innocent, a victim of his evil advisors. But the next year, 1377, Edward himself passed away. It was now the king's young grandson, the 10-year-old Richard II, who succeeded to the throne.

- Exactly at this moment of weakness, the French attacked. They landed, among other places, on the Isle of Wight, seizing animals and other goods and taking a number of prisoners.

- A fog of apprehension hung over England, which was compounded by a deep-seated hatred of the royal system of justice—or injustice. The rebels loathed the corruption of the legal system and its growing intrusiveness. The Statute of Laborers of 1351, issued in the immediate wake of the plague, exemplified the far-reaching powers of the 14th-century crown. Compounding this anger was a series of suffocating poll taxes.

- In May 1381, anti-tax resistance began to spread in the county of Essex. Following the new parliamentary legislation to the letter, a royal steward commanded his officers to arrest the protestors. But many people fled into the woods to escape from punishment. There, according to one chronicle, they hid for some time, but then "went from town to town inciting other people to rise against the great lords and good men of the country."

- The chief justice of the royal court known as Common Bench—Sir Robert Belknap—was then sent to put down the resistance and issued multiple indictments. This only escalated the situation. The commoners confronted the judge, forcing him to promise to suspend his investigation and to reveal the names of the jurors who had collaborated in the indictments. The jurors were captured and summarily beheaded.

Spreading Rebellion

- Other rebellious events unfolded across the southeast. In Kent, for example, a charismatic leader known as Wat Tyler soon emerged as the figurehead of the whole uprising. It was Tyler who led the rebel march from rural Kent toward London.

- Everywhere in the southeast, the uprising soon became radicalized. Violence began to spiral in the counties surrounding London. The insurgents began to "execute all the lawyers in the land whom they could capture," says Walsingham.

- One group captured the chief justice of the King's Bench, Sir John Cavendish. Cavendish was decapitated, along with the prior of the powerful Abbey of Bury St Edmunds. The rebels then stuck their heads onto the tops of lances and carried them around.

- Walsingham, unsurprisingly, represents this kind of violence as savage. However, he also occasionally acknowledges that there was a real political agenda.

The Rebels Reach London

- Groups of rebels, thousands strong, approached the city of London. Insurgents from Essex and Kent converged and persuaded the gatekeepers to let them in through the city gates on Thursday, June 13, 1381.

- Describing the events of the next two days, the chroniclers give a sense of alcohol-fueled, riotous violence. Walsingham even suggests that some drunken rebels "secretly killed those of their colleagues whom they have previously hated."

- However, there was primarily a series of targeted attacks on the most hated institutions, politicians, and symbols of power in London. Among them were Fleet Prison, the law courts at the Temple, and the duke of Lancaster's palace at the Savoy.

- Here, we read, the rebels "took all the torches they could find, and lit them, and burnt all the cloths, coverlets and beds." It's worth noting that in this action, as in many other phases of the rising, women appear to have been directly involved.

- A woman named Johanna Ferrour was later accused (along with her husband) of having led the insurgents in Kent. Joanna then went onto burn the Savoy, stealing a treasure chest belonging to the duke of Lancaster.

The Rebellion Swells and Fades

- Eventually, on Friday, June 14, the child king Richard II was forced to meet Wat Tyler at Mile End. Here the rebels demanded abolition of serfdom, an end to all labor services and to all restrictions on the freedom to buy and sell land, and the guarantee of a general amnesty. Some chroniclers also mention revocation of the Statute of Laborers and the freeing of all prisoners.

- Another set of insurgents found their way into the Tower of London. There, they seized the archbishop of Canterbury (Simon Sudbury), the treasurer (Sir Robert Hales), and others, then beheaded them.

- That Saturday, Richard II and his retinue met Tyler and a large contingent of other rebels at Smithfield, just outside the city walls. Tyler approached the king confidently. The chroniclers present this as insolence.

- Speaking on behalf of the rebels, he renewed his demand for abolition of serfdom and added that all church properties were to be seized. After ensuring the basic subsistence of the clergy, this property was to be divided among all Christian parishioners. Only one bishop was to exist in England.

- The king agreed to these requests; he must have felt he had little choice. Then he commanded Tyler to return home, but Tyler did not. Thinking, perhaps, that his work was almost done, Tyler asked his men to send him a jug of ale.

- Tensions then began to rise between the two camps at Smithfield. Tyler was confronted by William Walworth, the mayor of London, in what was perhaps a deliberate provocation. A fight broke out.

- In the melee, Tyler was stabbed and struck through with a sword. He was taken to the hospital for the poor and was laid down in bed. But the mayor pursued him there and—says one chronicler—had him carried back out to Smithfield, where Tyler was publicly beheaded.

- The execution of this charismatic rebel leader threw the rebellion into immediate disarray. The chronicles tell us that the remaining rebels were now quickly surrounded, like sheep in a pen, ready for the slaughter. Over the coming days and weeks, there was a predictably vicious period of vengeance. Thousands of rebels were killed, the radical priest John Ball among them.

- In the longer term, this policy was followed by paid pardons like those that followed the Jacquerie in France. The government eventually issued a general amnesty, a shift in policy which chroniclers tended to attribute (in line with medieval convention) to the intervention of a new queen, Anne of Bohemia. The Peasants' Revolt was over.

Conclusion

- What was the long-term impact of the revolt? One part of the answer is straightforward: Poll taxes were never again levied in England until 1990, when they met similarly stiff popular resistance and were quickly withdrawn.

- The question of serfdom is more contested. It's clear that servitude did continue to decline, becoming rare within the next century, although some remaining serfs were intensely exploited in the decades after the rising. On the other hand, it's less clear that this was related to the revolt. Most historians suggest that the decline of serfdom was largely the result of independent economic factors: It simply wasn't efficient for landlords.

- Despite the rebels' revolutionary demands, the direct results were modest. The 19th-century political philosopher Friedrich Engels (Marx's famous collaborator) sympathized deeply with the rising, describing it as "a sally beyond both the present and even the future"—but also as one that could not fully succeed in the conditions of its own time.

- The real significance of the rising lies in its symbolic value. It was in large part born out of the power of ideas that were generated or amplified in the period after the plague. The Peasants' Revolt was led by men with exceptional leadership skills, whose ability to articulate these ideas stirred 14th-century people to rebellion.

- The rebellion would also come to be an inspiration to much later generations of people fighting across the world for freedom, equality, and justice. This was precisely why it mattered to an English-born thinker of the late Enlightenment era who would later come to live and die in the new nation of the United States: Thomas Paine. In his 1792 book *Rights of Man*, Paine would find kinship with the rebels of medieval England and especially their struggle against unjust taxation.

Reading

Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*.
Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*.
Jones, *Summer of Blood*.

Questions

1 What was the name of the radical priest whose ideas helped to foment revolutionary action in England?

a John of Gaunt
b Jean Froissart
c John Ball
d Wat Tyler

2 True or false? There is no evidence that women were directly involved in the Peasants' Revolt.

Answers: **1** c; **2** False

The Arthurian Court of Richard II

King Richard II of England came to the throne as a boy king in 1377, four years before the Peasants' Revolt. King Richard would oversee a remarkable period in English literature, art, and culture that is sometimes called the Ricardian renaissance.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Moral integrity is one of the key messages of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which was written in the last decades of the 14th century. It contains a description of Camelot, a legendary court that stands almost outside of time. The Arthurian tradition, to which this tale belongs, was always otherworldly, even if it had roots in some early medieval realities and Celtic folk traditions. However, the description of Camelot doubles as a veiled representation of a very real place: King Richard II's court.

Richard II's Background

- Richard II had been born in 1367 in Bordeaux. His father was Edward, the Black Prince, at that time heir to the throne of England. Having been born in France, Richard would have been exposed from a very young age to the sound of multiple languages and an international court culture.

- At the age of four, Richard had arrived in England. He became heir to the throne when the Black Prince died in 1376. A year later, still only 10 years old, Richard inherited the throne. But from the beginning, he may have been ill at ease among the English, and his sense of unease would have been magnified by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

- Shortly after the uprising, young Richard was then married to a foreign princess: Anne of Bohemia. The marriage was not universally popular. However, it would completely transform the culture and feeling of the English court.

Queen Anne's Influence

- Up until that point, English court culture had been nothing if not warlike. This was the land of Edward III and the Black Prince, victors at the battles of Crécy and Poitiers. But the arrival of Queen Anne brought a new sensibility and cultural cosmopolitanism into play.

- The literary scholar Alfred Thomas reminds us that 14th-century Bohemia was a veritable hub of European culture. It was here that Anne's father, the Holy Roman emperor Charles IV, had transformed Prague into a city that rivaled Florence as a cultural capital.

- Anne would also have been inspired by Bonne of Luxembourg, her aunt. Well before the Black Death, Bonne had married into the French royal family. She had commissioned a stunning book of prayers, an illuminated manuscript. Additionally, before her death of the plague in 1349, Bonne had been a patroness of the poet Guillaume de Machaut.

- This was the refined international culture that Anne now brought to warlike Britain, that strange and pugilistic island. Under Richard and Anne, the royal court experienced an artistic revival that would not be

matched until the Elizabethan era and the age of Shakespeare. At the royal court, in place of a culture of war, came a culture of luxury, delicacy, and beauty—and one of dangerous self-indulgence.

- At court, it was increasingly possible for powerful young men to rise to stratospheric heights. Chief among them was Robert de Vere, the earl of Oxford. According to the chronicler Jean Froissart, de Vere had the king completely under his thumb.

Tensions and Bloodshed

- By 1384, just two years after the royal marriage, political tensions were high. Among the old nobility, there was growing disdain for de Vere, especially after he left his first wife for one of Queen Anne's ladies-in-waiting.

- Meanwhile, another English aristocrat, the earl of Arundel, launched a blistering attack on the young king in Parliament, declaring that "every kingdom which lacks prudent government is in danger of destruction." Richard II, who always had a short fuse, went ballistic.

- Tensions reached a new peak in 1386 in the curiously named Wonderful Parliament. By this stage, there was also fury about taxation and corruption, and Parliament demanded the resignation of the royal chancellor. Richard responded with such venom that the parliamentarians were afraid for their lives.

- Nonetheless, they affirmed their right to meet and to advise the king on how to spend taxation. Incandescent with rage, the king observed, "Now we clearly observe that our people and our commons intend to resist and struggle to rise up against us." But Parliament stood firm, politely raising the possibility that he might be deposed.

- In the months that followed, Richard stubbornly resisted demands from Parliament. A group of his aristocratic opponents launched a formal appeal against de Vere and other leading courtiers; they came to be known therefore as the Lords Appellant. Among them was Henry Bolingbroke, the future Henry IV.

- Legal challenges then spilled into bloodshed. On the banks of the River Thames, soldiers under their command decisively crushed royal forces under de Vere, who was forced to flee ignominiously. By 1388, the appellants were triumphant. In the so-called Merciless Parliament, they oversaw the conviction and execution of many of the king's allies.

- Yet this victory would turn out to be short-lived. The Lords Appellant quickly met with military disaster on the northern border with Scotland, and their star began to wane. Richard was able to seize the reins of power once more. He was 20 years old, he fumed, and any man of that age had the right to his father's inheritance. In the years to come, he promoted an even more glamorous image of monarchy as a counterbalance to these early challenges.

A Dazzling Era

- People could be dazzled with clothing and jewelry. When he met the French king Charles VI near Calais in 1396, Richard wore a different outfit each day, beginning with a full-length gown of red velvet adorned with the white hart, or stag—his motif—and a hat studded with pearls.

- They could also be dazzled with architecture. In the new glow of victory, Richard rebuilt Westminster Hall. This was now one of the greatest halls of the entire kingdom, one made to seem like the nave of a great church.

- However, it is important not to assume that this period's achievements were purely those of the crown. To begin with, there were other powerful forces in English literary culture.

- One of them was Christian preaching. For instance, according to the scholar Gerald Owst, a vibrant culture of literary realism was born in the pulpit, where parish priests provided moral instruction to their flock.

- Beyond the church doors, there was also a thriving literature of critique, filled with concerns about royal advisers, lax churchmen, and corrupt lawyers. One poem unleashed a vitriolic attack on the vanity of Richard's court and the clownish self-indulgence of his courtiers.

- Various literary patrons were active. The visionary poem *Piers Plowman* was probably written primarily for the well-educated merchant class of London. Other poets worked under the aegis of great lords in other parts of the country, like the north Midlands and the northwest. The poetry being produced by men from the north included both *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Richard II's Instability and End

- In 1394, Anne passed away, perhaps from the plague. One chronicler tells us that, in his grief, Richard ordered her manor house to be razed to the ground. It might be tempting to see this as the act of a true romantic, but there are signs that Richard was emotionally unstable.

- Richard's enemies saw him as being increasingly tyrannical. In many parts of the country, sympathy grew for Henry Bolingbroke. The king eventually exiled him to France, but Henry slipped away, landing in the north of England, where he attracted a large military force aiming to depose the king.

- Meanwhile, Richard was busy campaigning in Ireland, and by the time he returned, the game was already over. By the summer of 1399, he was forced to surrender and was imprisoned in the northern castle of Pontefract. By the end of the cold Yorkshire winter, in February 1400, he had been killed. His partisans would face violent repression.

✶ The Ricardian renaissance had ended. Still, the explosion of culture reveals the extraordinary capacity of European people, just decades after the Black Death, to rebound spectacularly from catastrophe.

Reading

McHardy, *The Reign of Richard II*.
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.
Thomas, *The Court of Richard II*.

Questions

1 Which of the following was not a reason for aristocratic hostility to Richard II?

a The favoritism he showed to young men like Robert de Vere

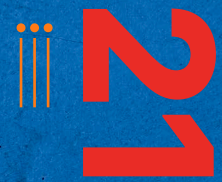
b His contempt for Parliament

c The extravagance and corruption of his royal government

d His sympathy for the new Lollard heresy

2 True or false? One of the key messages of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the importance of moral integrity.

Answers: 1 d; **2** True



Plague, Heresy, and the Questioning Spirit

The years that followed the Black Death were certainly an age of faith, but they were not an age of blind faith. People were looking intently for spiritual answers that might explain the human condition. Many of them questioned traditional teachings and critiqued the behavior of monks, friars, and clergymen. Their critiques were sometimes radical—at least in the eyes of the established church—and views that went too far were condemned as heresy.

The Church's Challenges

- When the Black Death struck, the church had several systemic problems. One was the tension between the idea of an all-powerful, benevolent God and the painful lived experience of many medieval men and women.

- In a society where life was always precarious. people had often turned to alternative belief systems in which the forces of good were locked in eternal battle against the forces of evil. This had been one of the central tenets of the so-called Cathar heresy, which had taken root in many parts

of southern France in the previous century. Never would it have been more tempting for some people to reject the idea of a benevolent God than it was during the plague.

Chaucer's Monk

One of the most vivid portraits in *The Canterbury Tales* is Geoffrey Chaucer's description of the Monk. He is a rotund, jovial, life-loving figure, riding a finely equipped horse. He's also a man in high office who lives a life of plenty.

- This first problem (the theological problem of suffering) seems to have been contained. People generally reconciled their trauma with a belief in a benevolent God by pointing to supposed moral failures in their society.

- The second problem was the wealth of religious institutions. These institutions had long benefited from economic growth and the generosity of donors: members of the royal family, the landed nobility, and other laymen who were anxious to save their souls.

- Wealthy elites also had a major influence within the church. They could purchase ecclesiastical positions (a practice known as simony, after the biblical story of Simon Magus). Often, when scholars talk about the corruption of the medieval church, they mean the influence of these moneyed social elites and their corrosive effects on the ideals of the church.

- The close relationship between society and the church was also reflected in the realm of sex and marriage. In principle, priests were vowed to a life of chastity, but in practice, many lived in arrangements that were much like ordinary marriages, with female partners who have been conventionally known as concubines.

- There were other challenges for the church, too. There were high rates of illiteracy among parish priests, meaning that some congregations felt poorly served.

- At the same time, the role of Latin as the dominant language of the church created a gulf between its higher ranks and the congregations they served. Additionally, because Latin learning was largely reserved for a male-dominated clerical elite, this accentuated a sense of spiritual alienation for some medieval women.

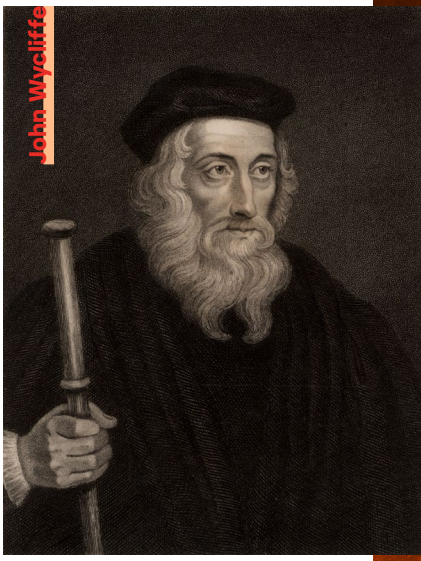
- Even before the plague, there had been several so-called heresies. The term *heresy* means a deviation from dominant beliefs. Many of these heretical belief systems aimed to imitate the poverty of Christ and his disciples, in contrast with the wealth of the established church.

- The idea of heresy was ultimately in the eye of the beholder. It may be safer to think of heretics as reformers, hoping to return the Christian community to its original principles. In the wake of the Black Death, the situation was ripe for a new wave of idealistic reform.

The Lollards

- The word that was used in late 14th-century England to describe the religious reformers was *Lollardy*. The word was meant as an insult. However, the English Lollards then co-opted this word for their own purposes.

  - They connected it with the Middle English word *loll*, meaning to "hang" or "sprawl." They said, "The most blessed Loller that was or ever shall be was our Lord Jesus Christ, for our sins lolling on the rood tree"—that is, hanging on the cross.



- The word *Lollards* had been used for some time in the towns of the Low Countries. But it was first used in England in 1382 to describe a circle of people surrounding a theologian and Oxford professor named John Wycliffe. In the late 1370s, Wycliffe was responsible for the first translation of the Bible into the spoken vernacular of the land: English. This was a revolutionary move.

- Wycliffe eventually condemned the whole papal court. He saw the church as being fatally flawed. In place of its wealth, he advocated voluntary poverty. Priests should hold property in common, he said, and tithes should not be paid to bad priests. Any possessions the church did retain were to be held in trust for the involuntary poor. In his view, the pope was an Antichrist, confession was unnecessary, and contrition alone was needed to erase sin.

- As a result of these ideas, Wycliffe had been suspended from his academic duties. It was claimed that he had caused a disturbance of the peace. His teachings were radical. The idea that property should be held in common seems, for instance, to anticipate the revolutionary movements of the English Civil War (in the mid-17th century).

Leaders of the Lollards

- The Lollard movement was not uniform or monolithic. It was a movement with many leaders. One of them was William Swinderby, a hermit who had acquired a reputation for great holiness.

- Swinderby had been living in a small room next to Leicester Abbey in the English Midlands. He then broke with the abbey and joined a circle in which reforming ideas were being discussed.

- In 1381, England had seen the so-called Peasants' Revolt. The religious and secular authorities alike suspected that men like Swinderby were fomenting social revolution. The bishop of Lincoln, who had authority over the area, summoned Swinderby and forced him to swear that he would abandon his heresy.

The *Twelve Conclusions*

- By 1395, passion for spiritual reform had spread to the streets of London. While Parliament was sitting, a document known as the *Twelve Conclusions* was nailed to the doors of Westminster Abbey and St. Paul's Cathedral.

- Along with a condemnation of the church and its rituals (like confession) and of the priesthood, pilgrimage, and the veneration of images, there were new claims in the *Twelve Conclusions*. They stated that taking part in warfare—including crusading—was un-Christian. They posited that the use of capital punishment should be restricted and that crafts like goldworking and weapon making were a sinful distraction from godly activity.

- These ideas were, of course, strongly disputed by the friars: A Dominican named Roger Dymmok inveighed against Lollardy in a richly illuminated manuscript presented to King Richard II. But the ideas would have been deeply appealing for many Christian believers, who had been distanced from the priestly class and were excluded from direct access to the Bible. For the Lollards, ordinary Christians were equal to any priest in God's eyes.

- It's likely that women found a voice and a sense of agency in the reforming Lollard movement. The investigations of the archbishop of Canterbury revealed that women were playing an important role; these were women with strength of character and a powerful way with words.

- One Lollard woman, Eleanor Higgs, claimed that she would burn the sacrament of the altar in the oven. Another asserted—despite the threat of torture—that "they cannot hurt me; my Lord knows my mind already."

Repression and Legacy

- Lollardy was repressed more and more viciously. It was probably not actually connected with the Peasants' Revolt, and Wycliffe himself is known to have opposed the revolt, but in that political climate, the movement fell under intense suspicion.

- Beginning in 1382, the year after the revolt, the crown authorized the arrest and imprisonment of unauthorized preachers, and Lollardy went underground. The repression was stepped up after 1388, as the king directed the archbishop of Canterbury to begin proceedings against heretics and heretical writings.

- The authorities were worried about a particular circle of reformers in the 1390s, in Northampton. The records suggest vehement opposition to images and crucifixes, and a hatred of pilgrimages. This group believed that it was better to spend the money on behalf of the poor rather than on the expenses of a pilgrimage adventure.

- Curiously, they also believed that all those who had been born after the year 1000 and who were regarded as saints by the orthodox were in fact diabolically infected. Finally, they denied the need for any material church, or even an order of priests, saying that every Christian was permitted to inform his brother about the Ten Commandments and the gospels.

- After Henry IV deposed Richard II in 1399, the punishment of heresy passed directly to the secular authorities. These were years of high tension. For instance, in Canterbury, the passionate mystic Margery Kempe was chased by a crowd.

- The repression of Lollardy probably led to further division and radicalization. The rebellion led by Sir John Oldcastle in 1414 was shaped by Lollard principles and was little short of revolutionary. Eventually, though, Oldcastle and his followers were captured and publicly executed.

- After Oldcastle's Revolt, any actual threat to church and state began to diminish. Yet many historians have indeed seen Lollardy as a precursor for the Protestant Reformation.

Reading

Heale, "The Monk."
Homza, *The Spanish Inquisition*.
Rex, *The Lollards*.

Questions

1 True or false? One of religious reformer John Wycliffe's radical ideas was that all property should be held in common.

2 True or false? Women played an important role in some heretical and unorthodox movements (like Lollardy) both before and after the Lutheran Reformation.

Answers: 1 True; 2 True

The Passionate Mystic: Margery Kempe

One day in the early 15th century, about half a century after the first outbreak of plague in her country, an Englishwoman of some means found herself in the holy city of Rome. Her name was Margery Kempe, and she was soon to be blessed with a remarkable vision of God's love.

Margery Kempe's Experience

- In Kempe's remarkable autobiography, the first autobiography written in the English language, she recounted this experience. As she recalled, God the Father himself took her by the hand, before a crowd of apostles, saints, angels, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. God told her, in part, "I take you, Margery, for my wedded wife."

- The story Kempe told in her autobiography reveals an enormous amount about the Christian mentality in the decades after the Black Death. One of the hallmarks of religious belief was a search for a direct and personal connection with the divine: an interiorized religion.

- Many Christians—both men and women—craved something more than external ritual, obedience, and the words of priests. They longed, heart and soul, for the beauty of communion with God himself.

- This tradition had not exactly begun with the plague, but it now intensified and would find some of its most powerful expressions among spiritual women. One of them was Saint Catherine of Siena.

Saint Catherine

- Catherine had been born in the very year in which the plague first arrived in Europe, 1347. She experienced her first visions as a young girl of six or seven, seeing an apparition of Jesus dressed in white and surrounded by a bright radiance. Within a short time, she had begun to participate in self-flagellation. Her elder sister's death in childbirth in 1362 accelerated her move toward extreme forms of spiritual devotion; she began to live on a diet of bread and uncooked vegetables.

St. Catherine of Siena

- In broad terms, the mystical tradition may have provided some late-medieval women with an opportunity to bypass the patriarchy. Some of them, including Catherine, also yearned for an alternative to earthly marriage and the subjection to an earthly husband.

- Catherine, like Margery, dreamed of a mystical marriage with God: she saw herself as the bride of Christ,

believing that Jesus himself had placed a ring on her finger. This dream must have been powerful, even for some women who were happy enough in their marriages but who aspired to something more transcendent.

Margery Kempe's Early Life

- Kempe's story began in the bustling English town of Lynn, the Norfolk town now known as King's Lynn. It was here that Margery was born in 1373.

- As a port town, Lynn was vulnerable to the arrival of epidemic disease. It was probably a main point of entry for the Black Death in 1349 and again in 1361. Scholars have speculated that the storage of dried fish—especially cod and herring—may have attracted rats.

- By the time of Margery's birth, Norfolk towns like Lynn and Norwich had recovered their commercial vitality. Her father, John Burnham, was a pillar of the local community. She was brought up with everything a girl could want and liked to dress as fashionably as possible.

- She married a young man, John Kempe, and loved him deeply. They had no fewer than 14 children together. But in her early 20s, when Margery gave birth for the first time, she experienced a medical and spiritual crisis that would mark the rest of her life. The birth was extremely difficult. In the belief that she was about to die, she called for the priest and attempted to make a confession. It's generally believed that she had wanted to confess some sexual transgression that had racked her with guilt.

- For some reason, she was unable to bring herself to make a full confession; the result was an emotional and spiritual collapse. "This creature," she wrote, "went out of her mind and was terribly troubled" for quite some time. She resorted to self-harm, biting her own hand so hard that she would always bear the scar.

- It was the apparition of divine love that saved her. Jesus came to her and asked, "Daughter, why have you forsaken me, though I never forsook you?"

- From this point in her life, mystical contemplation and devotion gave meaning and purpose to Margery's life, allowing her to overcome her pain—a story that was probably replicated among thousands of other English men and women of the post-plague era. For the first time in months, Margery began to eat and drink normally again.

Another Crisis and Turn

- By the age of about 30, Margery entered the brewing business, but this venture failed. Her reading of this failure was that it reflected her sin, her vanity, and her pride in her own beauty.

- Her response was to turn away from the world of pleasures and particularly from sex. She wore a hair shirt and attempted to pursue a life of chastity. Neither she nor her husband appear to have been completely successful in this endeavor, as they had several more children in these years.

- However, a new visitation from Jesus was decisive. He "ravished her spirit," she says, promising her that if she listened to him, she would be assured of the bliss of heaven. This new vision brought things to a head.

- One hot summer day, in the year 1412, Margery and her husband John were traveling back from York. She was now 39 years old. Her husband posed a question:

> Margery, if a man came along with a sword and was going to cut off my head unless I had sex with you as I have done before, tell me the truth—for you say you will not lie: would you allow my head to be cut off, or would you allow me to sleep with you again?

- Margery attempted to evade the question, but he insisted. Finally, she was forced to make a decision: "Truly I would rather see you be killed, than that we should go back to our uncleanness." Her husband was crushed. "You are no good wife," he responded.

- But the couple soon reached an agreement. She, the wealthier partner, would pay off his debts. He, in turn, would stop pressuring her for sex and would allow her to travel on pilgrimage.

Margery Kempe's Leaders

- Margery was inspired by other mystics. One female role model was Saint Bridget of Sweden, who had died in the year of Margery's birth (1373). Bridget had abandoned her marriage and motherhood for a life of sanctity. Margery invokes Bridget explicitly in her book.

- Additionally, Margery met one of the leading female spiritual lights of the age. Julian of Norwich was a renowned anchoress, a religious recluse, of a kind that was widely admired in the later Middle Ages.

- Julian, who had been born just before the plague, was a generation older than Margery. She may previously have been a Benedictine nun. But she, too, longed passionately for a union with the divine. In her *Revelations of Divine Love*, Julian writes of how she had longed for a deeper knowledge of the suffering of Christ. Julian had then experienced a transformative vision of Jesus as she confronted a near-death experience.

- Decades later, Margery and Julian met. Margery sensed that God had called on her to visit the now-elderly anchoress. One of Julian's key convictions was that God was love: a principle that would have appealed strongly to Margery, and to the traumatized world of the post-plague era. He was not vindictive but impassioned in his love for his children.

Margery Kempe's Travels

- By 1413, Margery was on a journey of pilgrimage that would take her to Jerusalem, to Assisi, and then to Rome (where this lecture opened). Margery was not a travel writer, and as such, her autobiography tends to focus largely on her spiritual experiences rather than on sightseeing. Still, she does relate some intense moments.

- In Mount Calvary in Jerusalem, Margery recalls how she fell down and "wallowed and wrestled with her body, spread her arms out wide, and cried with a loud voice as if her heart should have burst asunder." Her spectacularly emotional responses and her uncontrolled crying became a hallmark. Once she returned from her pilgrimage, after a hair-raising near-death experience in the North Sea, she continued to howl and cry with compassion for Christ's suffering.

- Margery was sometimes afraid that she might have been possessed by demons. However, she was sure that her spiritual visions would serve the good of humanity. She continued in her pilgrimages, sailing from Bristol to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, a journey that presented some challenges.

- On the bright side, in Santiago de Compostela, it was a jubilee year, or Xacobeo. This was a year in which the feast day of Saint James falls on a Sunday. The city offered "great happiness, both bodily and spiritually."

Kempe's Return

- When Kempe returned into the unforgiving world of 15th-century England, she often met intense hostility. At the church of York Minster, a priest confronted her. She also faced accusations of wickedness from the archbishop, to which she responded, "Sir, so I hear that you are a wicked man. And if you are as wicked as men say, you shall never get to heaven."

- Toward the end of her life, Margery settled back in Lynn. She was aging, but her mystical visions continued. Margery had acquired a reputation that led people to support and guide her. Although she liked to present herself as a solitary martyr, she clearly had followers, including multiple male clerics. Others continued to treat her with skepticism and hostility, but she thought of this as her cross to bear and a sign of her divine favor.

- She still loved her husband, though she had not lived with him for many years. John Kempe was now in his sixties, an old man by medieval standards. When he slipped and fell down the stairs, badly injuring himself, Margery returned to care for him, nursing him for several years. She also cared for him as he descended into dementia.

- John and Margery passed away within a few years of each other in the 1430s. This was about 100 years before the Reformation arrived in England. We can see her commitment to an interior, mystical spirituality as part of a trend that flourished in the aftermath of the plague and which would eventually come to be part of 16th-century religious tradition, both in Protestant and Catholic cultures.

Reading

Bell, *Holy Anorexia*.
Goodman, *Margery Kempe and Her World*.
Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.
Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Divine Love*.

Questions

1 Before her definitive turn away from earthly pleasures, Margery Kempe was active in which business?

a Manufacturing silk
b Brewing
c Fishing
d Farming

2 Where did Margery Kempe go on pilgrimage?

a Jerusalem

b Santiago de Compostela

c Assisi and Rome

d All of the above

Answers: 1 b; 2 d

23

The Canterbury Tales and the Specter of Death

Many people reading Geoffrey Chaucer in the 21st century feel a strong sense of kinship with this compelling medieval poet. He's a man of his time, yet he also shares with modern readers a fascinated delight in the vastness and chaos of the world. Of all Geoffrey Chaucer's work, it is his final masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, that is by far the best known. It is the subject of this lecture.

"The Clerk's Tale"

- *The Canterbury Tales* is a landmark in medieval literature, a symbolic high point in the process of recovery from the crisis of the Black Death. Chaucer almost never mentions the plague explicitly; few authors ever did. But the shadow of sudden death is everywhere. Consider, for instance, "The Clerk's Tale," the tale of the long-suffering Griselda.

- "The Clerk's Tale" is explicitly drawn from Petrarch, although it had originally been told by Boccaccio. It's a tale about stoicism in the face of suffering. The narrator, the Clerk, precedes it with some explicit reflections on death, prompted by the fact that both Petrarch and John of Legnano, a famous law professor from Bologna, have recently passed away.

- The Clerk is a quiet, scholarly type, and the Host has to urge him not to be too standoffish or intellectual. His tale is set in Italy. It tells of the marriage of the lord of Saluzzo to Griselda, the beautiful daughter of a poor man from the countryside, whom the lord spies on one of his outings. This marriage is brought about partly because the lord's subjects are fearful of what will happen if he were to die suddenly:

> Age creeps in always, still as a stone,
> And death menaces every age, and smites
> each estate of man, for no one escapes.

- Griselda is humble by nature, and in marriage, she is obedient. But the lord tests her by subjecting her to a series of appalling experiences. He first leads her to think that both of their young children (a girl and a boy) have been taken away to be killed because his countrymen angrily resent her rise to power.

- But Griselda bears her cross without complaint; she asks only that the sergeant who takes the children away bury them in a place where neither birds nor beasts can defile their bodies. The lord's subjects begin to suspect that he has murdered them, but in fact, the children have simply been spirited away to Bologna.

- He then leads her to think that he will be divorcing her, yet she continues to be faultlessly patient, even when he obliges her to lay the tables for his second wedding banquet. Only when the lord reveals that a young girl who has been brought to the palace is, in fact, their long-lost daughter does Griselda finally break down. The clerk ends the tale by explaining its meaning.

- God often tests us with ill fortune, the Clerk points out, by allowing us to be afflicted with the sharp scourges of fate. There is no mention of the plague, but there did not need to be. The resonance of this story would have been clear for a 14th-century audience.

"The Man of Law's Tale"

Chaucer's writing is both extremely English and deeply international. Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, he displays an astonishing breadth of geographical vision; he was, after all, a well-traveled citizen of a globalized world. Internationalization had enabled Europe's recovery, and it now shaped the contours of one of the age's greatest literary achievements. His global vision is on full display in "The Man of Law's Tale." This is the story of Constance, daughter of the Roman emperor. When writing of Constance, Chaucer was likely thinking of John of Gaunt's second wife, a long-suffering woman named Costanza who was evidently a model of Christian piety.

Peak Chaucer

- When he wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer was at the peak of his powers—and he knew it. It takes extraordinary confidence to pull the trick which he performs when the Host of the pilgrimage party turns to the Chaucer character himself: Chaucer the pilgrim. The Host makes fun of Chaucer's appearance.

- The joke is amplified when Chaucer the pilgrim then tells a spectacularly feeble tale. It's about a handsome knight called Sir Thopas who ventures into a forest, is suddenly smitten with the idea that he must marry an elf queen, and is challenged to combat by a giant.

- The listeners are clearly bored and start chatting to each other. The frustrated pilgrim Chaucer tells them to shut up. Eventually the Host brings an unceremonious end to it all, telling the pilgrim Chaucer that his ears are aching from this terrible storytelling.


Chaucer

- Chaucer then pulls a second trick. Having been put down humiliatingly by one of his own characters, the Host, Chaucer tries again and alters his tone dramatically. One of his hallmarks in *The Canterbury Tales* is sudden shifts of register, from the tragic to the comic and from the noble to the obscene.

- This time, the Chaucer pilgrim tells the painfully prosaic "Tale of Melibee." It's as heavy and philosophical as the first tale is light and fanciful. Some would say it's a deliberate attempt to be comically tedious.

- The "Tale of Melibee" is less a story than a series of philosophical reflections on how to deal with sudden misfortune. While Melibee is away, his enemies attack his house, beat his wife, and wound his daughter, leaving her for dead. Despite his impulse to seek immediate revenge, his wife, Dame Prudence, counsels him at extraordinary length, citing philosophers such as King Solomon and the stoic philosopher Seneca. Dame Prudence advises her husband to moderate his grief.

- For most modern readers, the "Tale of Melibee" is unreadably dull, and some have seen it as literary revenge on the rude Host. But it has moments of interest, reflecting ideals of anger management, emotional restraint, and even antiwar sentiment. Says one of the wiser neighbors in the story, "There is many a man who cries 'War! War!' who has little idea what war involves."

A Monument to the Human Spirit

- Taken as a whole, *The Canterbury Tales* are a monument to the human spirit—a riotous, fluid, and unfinished monument. Chaucer seems never to have wanted it to finish. As the end of the journey approaches, chaos erupts on the road when the Host realizes the heavily-drinking Cook is completely plastered and has fallen behind the group.

- The Manciple (an official responsible for provisioning a university with food and drink) points out that the Cook's breath stinks and that he's yawning. The Cook becomes livid, starts gesticulating wildly, and falls off his horse.

- Only with great difficulty can his fellow travelers pull him up out of the mud. The Manciple says he doesn't desire a fight, pulls out a gourd filled with wine, and shares it with the grateful Cook. All is well, and the Manciple tells his tale—the penultimate tale on the journey.

- The Manciple relates how once upon a time, Phebus kept a beautiful white crow in his house. In the tale, the crow sings as beautifully as a nightingale, and it can also speak. However, while Phebus is away, his wife sleeps with another man. This plot element leads to an entertainingly long digression on the impossibility of trapping birds for long.

- When Phebus arrives home, the crow tells him exactly what has happened. Phebus is distraught. He kills his wife, threatens to commit suicide, and turns his ire on the crow, promising that none of his descendants shall ever sing again.

- In his closing words, the Manciple indulges in a long, drawn-out extraction of the moral of the story: Keep quiet. Don't speak. Don't tell a man that his wife has been sleeping with somebody else. Don't bring any news at all, either good or bad. Don't tell stories. The warning about telling tales is quite a piece of irony, coming at the virtual end of *The Canterbury Tales.*

- Following it is the final tale, which is told by the Parson and is a curiously pious epilogue to the work. It sits uneasily with much of what has gone before. It may in part be an expression of Chaucer's late-life experiences.

- For the last 10 months of his life, beginning in December 1399, Chaucer lived in a house in the gardens of Westminster Abbey. He may have been very ill, although we have no details about the last stage of his life. He would have been able to buy ale and bread from the monastery kitchens and to make peace with God.

- In the end, Chaucer's most enduring quality remains: his limitless love for humanity. With humor, compassion, and endless creative energy, he bore witness to the vibrant, colorful world of the living—a world made up of people who had narrowly escaped the ever-present specter of death.

Reading

Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales or Selected Canterbury Tales*.
Strohm, *Chaucer's Tale*.
Turner, *Chaucer*.
Wallace, *Geoffrey Chaucer*.

Questions

1 In "The Clerk's Tale," what are Griselda's most prominent qualities?

a Patience and humility
b Lustfulness and avarice
c Anger and violence
d Intellect and genius

2 True or false? Chaucer's telling of the trials and tribulations of Constance, in the "Man of Law's Tale," is probably shaped by the real-life experiences of John of Gaunt's wife.

Answers: 1 a; 2 True

24

The Plague and Us: Reaching across Time

This lecture looks at how the creativity and energy of the period after the plague has inspired modern artists and writers in painting, film, and literature. Many of them have sought to find a way out of the horror and suffering of their own times. First, however, the lecture spends some more time back in the 14th century.

Responses to the Plague

- After the Black Death, many people sought healing and meaning through an intensely personal religious faith. For some, like the Italian poet Petrarch, earthly love could even be alchemized into a higher love for the divine. The passionate mystic Margery Kempe also experienced a personal connection with God.

- Spiritual intensity, however, did not mean blind faith in the church. The period after the plague, in fact, saw a rising tide of critique toward the church. One of the lasting legacies was a spirit of questioning.

- Medieval resilience also involved other responses to the plague. For instance, physicians of the time did not share our modern scientific principles. But many of them made careful observations and articulated a coherent understanding of human health. With deep insight, they explored the role of human psychology and emotions. Meanwhile, governments across Europe, particularly in Italy, intensified their efforts to clean up the streets.

- However, some responses were aggressive, intolerant, and violent. One example is the persecution of Jewish communities, which went beyond localized acts of violence, approaching the level of genocide.

- In the medieval world, as is the case in many parts of our own world, social and economic inequality was reflected in radically different levels of access to justice. The stories of Robin Hood reflected a perception that real justice was to be found outside the law. On the other hand, one of the most compelling themes in this period is the intensified struggle for justice, from Cola di Rienzo's social revolution in Rome to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

A Painting, a Film, and a Novel

A Tale from the "Decameron"

- A dynamic culture survived the Black Death, which has a deep, humane value for us in modern times. To illustrate this, three good examples come from 20th-century works of art—a painting, a film, and a novel—that draw inspiration and hope from the age of the plague.

- First, consider the painting: John William Waterhouse's *A Tale from the "Decameron"* was completed in the year 1916. It depicts a scene from Boccaccio's masterpiece.

  - In the garden of a secluded Italian villa, somewhere in the hills above the city of Florence, a group of seven young women and three refined young men have gathered among the flowers and trees.

  - A young man regales his audience, seated next to a fountain with a lute on his lap. It is a scene of idyllic and peaceful beauty—a counterpoint to the horrors that surround them, as the Black Death rages in the city below.

- At the time Waterhouse completed his *Decameron*-inspired painting, the world was embroiled in World War I. The year 1916 saw the Battle of the Somme, in which hundreds of thousands of men met an unglamorous death among the poppy fields of Belgium.

- Waterhouse was deeply sensitive to the brutality of modern conflict. In 1900, he had helped to found the Artists' War Fund, to raise money for English casualties of the Boer War. Death was pervasive in his world. By the time of the Great War, he was gravely ill with cancer, and *A Tale from the "Decameron"* would prove to be his penultimate painting. His very last work, still unfinished when he died the following year, was entitled *The Enchanted Garden*, and it was also inspired by Boccaccio.

- The painted gardens of Waterhouse's last paintings are the antithesis of the muddy killing fields of Belgium. Waterhouse found hope in Boccaccio's vision of beauty.

The Seventh Seal

- This lecture now turns to Ingmar Bergman's black-and-white film *The Seventh Seal*, which appeared in 1957. It is set 600 years earlier, in the year 1350, against the backdrop of the Black Death and the Crusades. In the opening scene, a battle-hardened knight named Antonius Block returns from crusading, landing with his squire on the shores of his native Sweden. He would perhaps have been returning from the Russian theater of war, where the Teutonic knights had been fighting.

- The knight is accosted by the unforgiving figure of Death, who has a black robe and a white face. But Block is not ready to die. The knight challenges Death to a game of chess and proposes a deal: Death will allow him to live for as long as he survives in the game. If he wins, Death will allow him to go free.

- Bergman, as director, was inspired by the wall paintings he had seen as a child in churches near Stockholm, particularly paintings by the 15th-century artist Albertus Pictor. The motif of the knight playing chess with Death is drawn from these wall paintings.

- In another scene, the knight's squire enters a church and meets Albertus Pictor, who is completing a cycle of paintings depicting the plague. Each painted image we see is then enacted as a later scene in the film.

- Bergman presents a stark vision, filled with existential doubt and anguish. He focuses on the crisis of Western civilization rather than on resilience or recovery. But this is not, primarily, a film about the Middle Ages. Bergman himself described it as "a modern poem, presented with medieval material that has been very freely handled."

- In many respects, it responds to the specific circumstances of its time. In the mid-1950s, Europe was emerging from the rubble of World War II and was haunted by the specter of nuclear apocalypse, as the Cold War gathered force. "In the Middle Ages, men lived in terror of the plague," Bergman wrote. "Today they live in fear of the atom bomb." We can also see the film as a response to broader conditions of modern life: a culture of materialism and consumerism, in which the deeper meaning of life is not always clear.

- What does Bergman value in the Middle Ages? It seems that he values its spiritual faith. This is something that the knight, Antonius Block, yearns for, although for him it is seemingly just out of reach; he longs for an age of order and spiritual certainty.

- The faith shows up in the characters of the young couple Jof and Mia—that is, Joseph and Mary—who are traveling entertainers with a young son. As one critic has written, these are "faultless souls who survive to start a train of hope for humanity again." Unlike almost every other character in the film, they survive the terrifying figure of Death.

A Month in the Country

- This lecture now turns its focus to the novel *A Month in the Country*, which was published by the English writer J. L. Carr in 1980. It is set in the English countryside in the year 1920—the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The novel was adapted for the screen a few years later.

- *A Month in the Country* is an understated and deeply moving evocation of recovery and healing from traumas both personal and collective. In this healing process, a slow encounter with 14th-century art is central to recovery. As in Bergman's film, wall painting is the connecting link between past and present. A parish church is the key setting.

- The narrator is Tom Birkin, a restorer of medieval wall paintings. He has come, unheralded and unwelcomed, to restore the painting of the parish church, which has been hidden beneath the whitewash by later, more austere generations of Christians.

- Birkin has reverence for the medieval past. But he needs to restore himself as well as the wall painting. He needs to heal from deep injuries. In the opening scenes of the novel, the scars are palpable. He arrives alone, on a deserted station in Yorkshire. Around him, he senses hostility: this is "enemy country," he says. We soon learn of the twitch in his face, which he developed at the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917.

- As Birkin walks to the church through a rainstorm, there are signs of decay and exhaustion: dilapidated farmhouses, rusting fences, and the mustiness inside the parish church. Virtually penniless, he chooses to sleep in the church.

- In *A Month in the Country*, Birkin shares his unspoken trauma with Charles Moon, an amateur archaeologist and socially privileged war veteran who is working in the next field. Moon has been hired to search for the grave

of a local medieval bigwig who died in 1373. And he, too, is in search of a cure for his invisible injuries. He reveals to Birkin that, far from simply experiencing stiffness in the leg, he is suffering the effects of shrapnel.

- Birkin, for his part, is also hiding a more private trauma: His wife has left him, going off with another man. It's only in the process of recovering the wall painting that he finally begins to glimpse the possibility of his own recovery. The painting dates from the period "after the Black Death," he says, explicitly.

- Before he can see anything beneath the whitewash, he suspects it is a depiction of the Last Judgment. He's right. Last Judgment paintings typically occupied the wall space right above the main chancel arch, offering an impressive panorama.

- By the 14th century, Christ was often depicted in an upper tier, displaying the kinds of bloody wounds that grab Charles Moon's attention in the novel; he's accompanied by the apostles and by Mary. In a lower tier, viewers would generally find the souls of the damned and the saved, being separated and led off to their eternal fates.

- As Birkin gets to work, it becomes clear that this is a spectacular painting. Birkin develops a sense of kinship with the painter, a man reaching out across time.

- Birkin is fascinated by one feature of a figure falling into the pit of hell: a man with a crescent-shaped scar on his forehead. This is the anonymous painter himself.

- He was a Muslim, out of place among the English Christians. Moon discovers his skeleton just beyond the churchyard wall. It's a sense of kinship that is the catalyst for Moon's recovery—the sense of shared, silent suffering with a figure from the distant past.

✶ Ultimately, this is what draws many of us back to the Middle Ages: the feeling of kinship with people reaching out to us across time and the sense that they can teach us something extraordinarily valuable. Their resilience is compelling, fully worth our time and attention on its own terms while also giving us hope and inspiration.

Reading

Aberth, *A Knight at the Movies*.
Carr, *A Month in the Country*.
Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings*.

Questions

1 John William Waterhouse's *A Tale from the "Decameron"* can be read as a response to the brutality of which war?

a The Hundred Years' War
b The Thirty Years' War
c World War I
d World War II

2 Ingmar Bergman explicitly described his medieval film *The Seventh Seal* as a response to what modern fear?

a The atom bomb
b Religious extremism
c Mass pandemic
d Biological warfare

3 True or false? Both Bergman's film and J. L. Carr's novel *A Month in the Country* involve wall paintings as a connecting link between the past and the present.

Answers: 1 c; 2 a; 3 True

Bibliography

Bibliographic Note

Among the many compelling books on the Black Death and its aftermath are some excellent editions of primary sources, allowing us to "listen" to the original voices of people living during and after the plague. One indispensable starting point is Rosemary Horrox's *The Black Death* in the outstanding Manchester Medieval Sources series, which also includes works by Samuel K. Cohn, A. K. McHardy, Anthony Musson, and P. J. P. Goldberg, all listed below. John Hatcher's *The Black Death: A Personal History* is a partly fictional reconstruction of the immediate impact of the Black Death on one English community, deeply informed by his knowledge of the original sources.

We also have splendid translations of some of the medieval literary masterpieces, including Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, along with the anonymous poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*. Among many wonderful recent literary studies, Marion Turner's *Chaucer: A European Life* sheds fresh light on our constant companion in this lecture series. In terms of interdisciplinary work, the Rigby and Minnis volume *Historians on Chaucer* shows how resourcefully historians can mine literary sources. And there are few modern novels that can immerse us so effectively in the world of the Middle Ages as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose.*

Finally, those interested in the epidemiology of the plague and its global dimensions in the 14th century and beyond should pay particularly close attention to the continuing work of Monica H. Green.

Bibliographic Citations

Aberth, John. *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

———. *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348–1350*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017.

Armitage, Simon, trans. *Pearl: A New Verse Translation*. New York: Liveright, 2016.

———. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Translated by Simon Armitage. New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2007.

Armstrong, Guyda, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen Milner, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Bailey, Mark. *After the Black Death: Economy, Society, and the Law in 14th-Century England*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Bennett, Judith. "Queens, Whores and Maidens: Women in Chaucer's England." Lecture presented at Royal Holloway, University of London, on March 5, 2002. Part of the Hayes Robinson lecture series.

Bennett, Judith, and Ruth Mazo Karras, eds. *Oxford Handbook on Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Black, Winston, ed. *Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West: A History in Documents*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2020.

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *Decameron*. London and New York: Penguin, 1995.

Boehm, Barbara Drake. *The Colmar Treasure: A Medieval Jewish Legacy*. New York: Scala Arts Publishers, 2019.

Caferro, William. *Petrarch's War: Florence and the Black Death in Context*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Campbell, Bruce M. S. *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Carr, J. L. *A Month in the Country*. London and New York: Penguin, 2000.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Selected Canterbury Tales*. Trans. Sheila Fisher. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012.

———. *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. David Wright with introduction by Christopher Cannon. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

———. *Troilus and Criseyde*. Trans. Barry Windeatt. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Childs, Wendy R. "The Shipman." In *Historians and Chaucer*, eds. Rigby and Minnis, 277–96.

Cohn, Samuel K. *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe*, 1200–1425. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Cohn, Samuel K., ed., *Popular Protest in Late-Medieval Europe: Italy, France, and Flanders*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004.

Dendle, Peter. "'The Age of Faith': Everyone in the Middle Ages Believed in God." In *Misconceptions About the Middle Ages*, eds. Stephen Harris and Bryon L. Grigsby, 49–53. New York: Routledge.

Dobson, R. B. *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. London: Macmillan, 1980. Also available as an American Council of Learned Societies Humanities Ebook.

Doubleday, Simon R. *The Wise King: A Christian Prince, Muslim Spain, and the Birth of the Renaissance*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

Dyer, Christopher. *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Trans. William Weaver. Boston: Mariner Books, 1994.

Einbinder, Susan L. *After the Black Death: Plague and Commemoration among Iberian Jews*. Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Falk, Seb. *The Light Ages: The Surprising Story of Medieval Science*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2020.

Finucane, R. C. *The Rescue of the Innocents: Endangered Children in Medieval Miracles*. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1997.

Firnhaber-Baker, Justine. *The Jacquerie of 1358: A French Peasants' Revolt*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Geltner, Guy. *Roads to Health: Infrastructure and Urban Wellbeing in Later Medieval Italy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

Goldberg, P. J. P., ed. *Women in England, c. 1275–1525*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.

Goodman, Anthony. *Margery Kempe and Her World*. London and New York: Longman, 2002.

Green, Monica H. "Taking 'Pandemic' Seriously: Making the Black Death Global." *The Medieval Globe* 1, no. 1 (2014): 27–61.

———. "The Four Black Deaths." *The American Historical Review* 125, no. 5 (2020): 1601–1631.

Hanawalt, Barbara. *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Hatcher, John. *The Black Death: A Personal History*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009.

Heale, Martin. "The Monk." In *Historians on Chaucer*, eds. Rigby and Minnis, 137–155. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Henderson, John. *The Renaissance Hospital: Healing the Body and Healing the Soul*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006.

Higgins, Ian Mcleod. *Writing East: The "Travels" of Sir John Mandeville*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Hilton, R. H. *Bond Men Made Free*. 2nd ed. Abingdon: Routledge, 2003.

Holt, J. C. *Robin Hood*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2011.

Homza, Lu Ann. *The Spanish Inquisition, 1478–1614*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006.

Horrox, Rosemary, ed. *The Black Death*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994.

Horrox, Rosemary. "The Pardoner." In *Historians on Chaucer*, eds. Rigby and Minnis, 443–459. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Hymes, Robert. "Epilogue: A Hypothesis on the East Asian Beginnings of the *Yersinia pestis* Polytomy." *The Medieval Globe* 1, no. 1 (2014): 285–308.

Irwin, Robert. *The Alhambra*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

———. *Ibn Khaldun: An Intellectual Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Jones, Dan. *Summer of Blood: The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*. London: Harper Collins, 2010.

Julian of Norwich. *Revelation of Divine Love*. Trans. Elizabeth Spearing with introduction and notes by A. C. Spearing. London: Penguin, 1998.

Keene, Bryan C., ed. *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World through Illuminated Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019.

Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Trans. B. A. Windeatt. London and New York: Penguin, 2000.

———. The Book of Margery Kempe. Trans. Anthony Bale. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Mandeville, Sir John. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Trans. Charles Moseley. London and New York: Penguin, 2005.

McGinn, Bernard. *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

McHardy, A. K., ed. *The Reign of Richard II: From Minority to Tyranny, 1377–1397*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

Meiss, Millard. *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951.

Musson, Anthony. *Crime, Law, and Society in the Later Middle Ages*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

Musto, Ronald G. *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzo and the Politics of the New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Orme, Nicholas. *Medieval Children*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

Palmer, James A., trans. *The Chronicle of An Anonymous Roman: Rome, Italy, and Latin Christendom, c.1325–1360*. New York and Bristol: Italica Press, 2021.

Rawcliffe, Carol. *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013.

Rex, Richard. *The Lollards*. London: Palgrave, 2002.

Rigby, Stephen, and Alastair Minnis, eds. *Historians on Chaucer: The "General Prologue" to "The Canterbury Tales."* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Rosewell, Roger. *Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008.

Sabine, Ernest L. "Latrines and Cesspools of Mediaeval London." *Speculum* 9, no. 3 (July 1934): 303-321.

Siraisi, Nancy. *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine: An Introduction to Knowledge and Practice*. 2nd ed. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Smoller, Laura. "Of Earthquakes, Hail, Frogs, and Geography." In *Last Things: Death and the Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, eds. Caroline Walker Bynum and Paul Freedman, 156–187. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

Strohm, Paul. *Chaucer's Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury*. New York: Viking, 2014.

Thomas, Alfred. *The Court of Richard II and Bohemian Culture: Literature and Art in the Age of Chaucer and the Gawain Poet*. Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 2020.

Turner, Marion. *Chaucer: A European Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Varlik, Nükhet. "New Science and Old Sources: Why the Ottoman Experience of the Plague Matters." *The Medieval Globe* 1, no. 1 (2014), 193–227.

Wallace, David. *Geoffrey Chaucer: A New Introduction*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Wallis, Faith, ed. *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010.

Young, David. *The Poetry of Petrarch*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 2005.

Image Credits

i	Amguy/iStock/Getty Images Plus
7	The Teaching Company Collection
10	Wellcome Library, London/CC BY 4.0
14	New York Public Library
31	Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program
34	Image courtesy Clark Art Institute. clarkart.edu
37	Heidelberg University Library
46	Internet Archive Book Images/flickr/Public Domain
57	Wellcome Library, London/CC BY 4.0
63	Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain
64	iljacker/Getty Images
70	whitemay/Getty Images
73	Internet Archive Book Images
81	Arran Bee/flickr/CC BY 2.0
85	Sailko/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 3.0
95	Wolfgang Rieger/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 3.0
101	New York Public Library
111	MarcoRof/Getty Images
117	Internet Archive Book Images
124	José Luiz Bernardes Ribeiro/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0
133	duncan1890/Getty Images
147	duncan1890/Getty Images
150	The British Library
167	Photos.com/Getty Images
173	The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Lore Heinemann, in memory of her husband, Dr. Rudolf J. Heinemann, 1996. www.metmuseum.org
184	The British Library

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Notes

Printed in the United States of America

4840 Westfields Boulevard
Suite 500
Chantilly, VA 20151-2299
USA
1-800-832-2412
www.thegreatcourses.com