

The Black Death

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The Black Death was surely a calamity that Europe never had experienced before. Maybe even unique in the history of mankind, because a prerequisite for it is an society of high population density and a lot of interaction. Its source may have been China, where this held true in an even higher degree than in Europe, but if it struck China with the same kind of severity that surely should have been documented in its chronicles and in its records, probably at the time more carefully kept than in the west. Of that one does not know. Or at least the book gives no indication of this state of affairs. Highly contagious and dangerous deceases must have been endemic all through the agrarian world, flaring up at regular intervals, and in that respect the Black Death was no exception. But why did it strike so hard?

It arrived in the Eastern Mediterranean in 1347 struck Italy, southern France with vehemence in 1348, came to England at the end of that year and spread northwards reaching Scandinavia in 1350. Where it raged, it raged for a couple of months and then spent itself. The means of communication seems to have been by sea, arriving in Scandinavia by Bergen and not more directly via a land-route through Russia. It is commonly understood that it was spread by the black rat, carrying fleas that acted as vectors¹. The course of the disease was swift and only intermittently allowed the victim to rally. There were different kinds, some more swift than others. Those that attacked the lungs were the deadliest, striking people at their best of healths and a few hours later leaving them dead². As so many people died one can wonder why not almost everyone did. Maybe some had better immunity, or were not as exposed. The filthy and crowded conditions in which people lived certainly did not help matters. The medical authorities were powerless, unable to administer anything beyond the merely palliative. The priests had to give the last rites and bury the dead. One would surmise that those people should suffer a higher rate of attrition than others, while the bishops and the lords of manor would be less often touched, which of course did not mean that they were immune.

First how many people died? This is a difficult question to sort out because the tolls usually given by contemporary witnesses are greatly inflated, often exceeding the entire populations of the towns they refer to. Also it is difficult to estimate the population during the time, but some estimates set the European figure to around 60 millions in the middle of the 14th century, where about twenty million were living in France. In fact for some parts of Europe, agrarian population density did not recover until the early 19th century. In fact some villages were deserted never to be revived again. And the extent of farmland did shrink. This all indicates a serious drop in population, more severe in relative terms

¹ Although there has been recent speculations that it was a kind of flu, it seems that it has conclusively been attached to the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*.

² Still in modern times the pneumonic variant has a mortality rate in excess of 90%.

than wars. Looking at the records of ministers in England, about half of them died. Other estimates make figures like a third more likely, thus all in all some 20 million people may have died in Europe alone during a few years. The spread was more or less uniform, but in central Europe there were some pockets which were not affected, maybe because they were rather isolated or maybe not having the critical density. On the other hand the Black Death ravaged Scandinavia brutally, although those lands were sparsely populated. On the other hand, what really matters is not the spread out density, which is misleading, but the density along regular routes of communications, which is how populations are usually distributed.

The author is an amateur and it shows. His interest is mainly in England, where he claims that the best records are, and where one consequently can get the most accurate picture. So after some preliminary discussions of Italy, especially Florence, and France, with an emphasis on Avignon, where the Pope was residing, and a detour in German lands, where the phenomenon of flagellation is mentioned with some horror, as well as the anti-semitic persecutions the catastrophe provoked. The author notes proudly that nothing like that happened in England, although admitting a bit shamefacedly that there were not that many Jews in England having been expelled before. Yet his amateur leanings show through when he tries to exhibit parallels between the English fortitude during the Black Death with that of the Blitz, while extolling the stiff upper lip. This is merely silly.

Although most of the book is about demographic statistics, there is no attempt at painting a more coherent picture, only dropping some numerical estimates randomly seems to qualify as a discussion. The outcome of many pages of inconclusive speculation may be summarized in a confidence interval of between a third and a half, as already mentioned above.

In order to transcend the bare statistics the author tries his hand at fiction by picturing two neighboring villages and how they fared. One cannot say that the exercise is very successful, it is too brief, too factual, to actually go beyond what we already know as readers. Every family would lose some members, and there would be distress and confusion. Perhaps not as much as would be the case today, would a similar pandemic strike us, as modern civilization is far more interdependent than the Medieval one, where people tended to be rather self-sufficient.

There was of course horror, on the other hand Medieval man was used to pestilence and famines as well as the intermittent war. The church had of course fostered a rather submissive attitude towards fate, and it was all blamed on sinful living, a punishment for past sins. But in what did those past sins really consist in? The author claims that the church suffered a severe loss of prestige as a consequence of the plague, what had it done to properly warn or protect their flocks. Furthermore as a large part of the priesthood died, replacement was not easy, and in many cases were of a desperate nature, further depriving it of people's respect. But to speculate, as the author does, that the plague really brought about the reformation some century later is out-of-bounds. Nothing like that happened in Southern Europe. But of course, there is nothing to stop one from adding it to the many contributing causes one can easily think of.

More interestingly though, the severe loss of manpower, meant that wages went up, as there were so few hands available. It also meant that people bound to a manor was able to

escape, seeking more lucrative employment elsewhere, although the authorities did their best in subsequent decades to stem this development. True, because so much were lying fallow, there was an opportunity for men to free themselves and find their own plots of land. The clergy suffered a lot and was not able to replenish itself. And the universities suffered too, and much higher learning was put on hold. Many artisans died as well as artists, and the author claims that culture suffered as a result. The level of public buildings, such as predominantly churches, went down, as skills were lacking.

The Black Death was not, as noted an isolated phenomenon, the Big Death, as we say in Swedish³ was surrounded by smaller outbreaks. The Black Death was like a fire, flaring up and going down, but never fully eradicated. Possibly the last of the secondary outbreaks was the great Plague in London in 1665-66, more than three century later⁴. Thus what the big pandemic caused was further confirmed by a sequence of smaller ones.

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³ 'Digerdöden'. Ironically the earliest documented record of the term 'Black Death' was actually to be found in Sweden (swarte död) in the middle of the 16th century, and in the next it was taken up by the Danes and then spread to most European languages. The reason for the name was that many victims blackened during death.

⁴ According to the author. Other sources place the end of the so called Second Pandemic as late as 1750 In recent time there has also appeared a Third Pandemic