

## **'Have historians overstated the cultural impact of the Black Death?'**

### **Introduction**

The introduction to this essay will first outline the principle aspects of the period under scrutiny, briefly describing how “the Great Pestilence” (as it was then known) spread globally, its immediate effects, and the manner of its representation in contemporary literature and art. It will then establish the extent of historical debate on the impact of the ‘Black Death’ (as it came to be called only from the seventeenth century) on the contemporary populace on the regions under consideration (Herlihy, 1994). Whilst nineteenth century historians emphasised the extensive cultural and economic effects of the black death, viewing at the most decisive event of the later medieval period (Carpentier, 1962), in the twentieth century scholars instead moderated this view, arguing that in many ways the impact was limited, and that cultural and social change in the wake of the Black Death instead responded to broader pressures (Siraisi, 1982). So too, have they pointed to the different impacts the black death had across regions dependent on the extent of the population effected. Yet much of this comparison has focused on the economic impact of the plague and the effect that depopulation had on societal structure (for instance Saltmarsh, 1941–43). This essay will instead make an independent contribution by assessing cultural impact of the Black Death in England and Italy through close analysis of three specific spheres: education, the church, and art.

### **Education**

This section will explore the varied effects of the Black Death on education and particularly in the universities of England and Italy, arguing that the cultural impact of the disease was

extraordinarily varied, offering obviously negative effects but also some positives. While contemporary documents lament the effects of the Black Death (Courtenay, 1980) the disease also benefitted universities, who received greater support and allegiance as a result of its devastations (Campbell, 1932). The Black Death created a period of medical advances, particularly in the field of surgery, and post-mortem dissection was approved to seek information on the disease. Elsewhere, interest in astrology and prognostications also developed. In some instances too university enrolment actually increased during this period, despite assumptions that the Black Death harmed populations of universities (Courtenay 1980). Here, one might argue that the Black Death's impact has been overstated. The essay will also explore the effect of the disease on schools, arguing that after 1348 there was in fact an increase in the number of schools in England across age groups. This development appears to have been prompted by the depletion of local clergy and the freeing up of money caused by population decline (Moran,1975). The analysis will lead into a consideration of the effect on the church.

### Church

This section will explore religious responses to the Black Death through contemporary attitudes to faith and the Church (Horrox, 1994), arguing that here the cultural effects of the disease were significant, complex, and have generally not been overstated in scholarship. Faced with higher than average mortality rates (Courtenay, 1980) within the church, the recruitment and ordination of priests had to change drastically in the wake of the disease, as did educational requirements for priests (Pantin, 1960). This development saw the church criticised by contemporaries, but this essay will argue it also highlighted the vulnerability of man, and the weakening of the church in the eyes of the secular population of Europe prompted a focus on the active, temporal life in a new way expressed in the literature of (amongst others), Boccaccio

and, later, Chaucer, revealing more complex attitudes to religion than had hitherto been recorded. The Black Death also changed attitudes to burial and death more broadly, both within and without the Church. These changes were not just found in written records, but in the archaeological evidence too. Changes to burial practices, for instance, led to a separation between the living and the dead, as graveyards were newly positioned at further remove from towns (Daniell, 1997). While some of these developments followed trends existing before the Black Death, others were catalysed or begun by the disease, in particular social customs surrounding funerary rites, as fear of contagion shaped how people treated the bodies of their families and friends during sickness and death. In society so intimately linked to the church and Christianity, changes of this nature profoundly affected contemporary culture.

### Art

The art produced by those threatened by the disease provides a third fertile angle of inquiry. The work of Millard Meiss (1951) has argued that the plague had a profound effect on art, shaped by pessimism and fear to result in radical changes to style and theme in Florence and Sienna in particular. This view is supported by the prevalence of the macabre in contemporary art, especially in representations of the “Dance of Death”. It will be argued, however, that Meiss’ arguments were overstated, and other responses to the Black Death are visible, for instance the growth in popularity of visual representations of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian and in imagery associated with Saint Roch, universal saints that grew to be visually associated with the plague as argued by Louise Marshall (1994). Art thus responded to the Black Death in varied and sophisticated ways, but overall images came to occupy considerable importance as a way of intercession with the divine.

### Conclusion

The study will conclude by gathering together the above evidence, arguing that one can claim certain historians have tended to overstate the cultural effects of the Black Death, usually through generalisation or overly simplistic remarks on the subject of its social and cultural impact. Yet the effects of the Black Death are undeniably profound and important, and deserve both close scrutiny and to be taken seriously as an agent for social and cultural change. Here it has been shown that, while the effects were wide-ranging and affected most aspects of cultural life, their severity and nature varied considerably, and they cannot be categorised as simply positive or negative. Historians have thus not overstated the *variety* of the effects on contemporary and later culture. In the fields of education, art and the church, the Black Death would shape future centuries through its impact.

## References

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