

of family holdings exclusively by the eldest son, became the rule in many parts of Europe. Yet average holding size in the common fields still shrunk from 1250 to 1348, and most younger sons stood no chance whatsoever of obtaining enough property to marry and support a family. Indeed, by the 1330s many eldest sons began to find themselves in similar positions. In the past, the peasant had been guaranteed the right, so to speak, to be a peasant; after 1250, this was becoming more and more difficult. The old manorial system was crumbling, and the lords, who seemed now to be doing little of real benefit, were getting richer. In 1347, the bonds and structure of European society, intricately developed through 400 years, were coming apart.

Gottfried, The Black Death chps. 3-5

CHAPTER 3

The Plague's Beginnings

SOMETIME IN THE LATE thirteenth or early fourteenth century the ecological balance of Eurasia was violently disrupted. A result was the spread of *Y. pestis* and plague from a permanent locus, the Gobi Desert, east into China, south into India, and west across central Asia to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Basin. This marked the onset of the Black Death and the coming of the second plague pandemic.

There are several theories that try to explain the Black Death. One, developed in part by William McNeill, assigns a crucial role to the nomadic rulers of the Mongol Empire.¹ Begun in the late twelfth century by Genghis Khan and still powerful in the fourteenth century, the Mongol Empire was important because it served as the link between less mobile Eurasian societies in China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. The Empire was bound together by highly mobile Mongol horsemen, who formed a network of military and governmental communications spanning Asia from Russia to Persia and from the Punjab to Manchuria. By the late thirteenth century, the Empire had reached the Yunan region in southern China. The Yunan is today an inveterate focus of plague, and many scholars believe that it has been

such since the sixth century A.D., when *Y. pestis* came from east Africa during the first pandemic. McNeill and others argue that, by the early fourteenth century, Mongol horsemen and supply trains had picked up the infected insect or rodent hosts of *Y. pestis* and carried them back to Mongol headquarters at Karakorum, in the Gobi Desert. Local Gobi rodents were then infected and they and Mongol horsemen carried it throughout the far-flung Empire in the same fashion that they had brought plague into the desert. There are variations on this theory; many scholars believe that the Gobi region was itself an inveterate focus of *Y. pestis*. In either circumstance, the domination of much of Eurasia by the Mongols was crucial to the spread of plague.

A second interpretation recognizes the importance of the Mongols, but claims that environmental, rather than human, factors were most important in plague's origins and spread.² The environmental theory relies on the climatic changes outlined in Chapter 2. As the prevailing Eurasian wind patterns changed, western Europe, dominated by Atlantic breezes, became much wetter; by contrast, sirocco winds from the Sahara blew hot, dry air into the already hot and dry central parts of Asia. The environmentalists believe that this gradual dessication, which began in the mid-thirteenth century and continued into the early fourteenth century, caused Mongol and Turkic nomads to move their flocks—the most important part of their pastoral economies—east and west in search of greener pastures. At the same time, central Asian wild rodents—marmots, susliks, tarbagons, ground squirrels, and the like—also moved in search of food and water, infecting local rodent populations with *Y. pestis* and thus extending the second plague pandemic.

Both theories are compelling, and the truth no doubt lies in some combination of the two. The importance of Mongolia, however, is paramount. The rodents and men of the steppes and desert were clearly the initial carriers of plague. The nomadic tribesmen seemed even to have a sense of the connection between plague and rodent intermediaries, and developed a series of customs to prevent the spread of *Y. pestis*. The trapping of marmots, usually the principal host to the flea *X. cheopis*, was generally forbidden; they could be shot, but only at a safe distance. Animals that moved slowly were untouchable, and there were widespread taboos about using furs from certain types of rodents. Whatever the precise cause or chronology, an epizootic, and then an epidemic, of plague erupted in the Gobi Desert sometime in the late 1320s.

News of natural disasters in Asia began to filter back to the West from travelers early in the 1330s.³ A series of droughts and earthquakes from 1330 to 1333 and subsequent flooding in 1334 caused widespread famines, which were worsened by swarms of locusts that destroyed what remained of the crops. These adverse ecological blows continued into the 1340s and, at some point—perhaps as early as 1331—were joined by plague. The Chinese records are vague. An unspecified epidemic broke out in the province of Hopei in 1331 and allegedly killed 90% of the population, but both the mortality and the description of the disease cast doubt on whether it was the Black Death. The first unimpeachable references appear in 1353, when chroniclers claim that two-thirds of China's population had died since 1331.⁴ Whatever the precise dates and circumstances, by the mid-fourteenth century, the Black Death had struck China and, by 1393, after successive cycles of plague epidemics, the Chinese population had dropped to about 90 million from a thirteenth-century high of over 125 million.

The westward spread of the Black Death is better documented. Between 1330 and 1346, plague probably infected the Western world in two ways. The first was strictly ecological. Dislodged central Asian rodents infected local animal, and then human, populations—a gradual, but very comprehensive, process. The second was the work of man—the elaborate East-West trading system established in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁵ There were three principal arteries of this East-West trade. The first was an overland path through northern China and across central Asia to the trading entrepôts along the northern shore of the Black Sea. This route was traversed primarily by caravans, which were protected by the Mongol Peace, a guarantee enforced by the Mongol khans. The second path was primarily by sea and involved the lucrative spice trade from south Asia. Ships sailed west across the Indian Ocean into the Persian Gulf, whence goods were transported by caravan across the northern Arabian Peninsula to the Levantine Coast. The third route also was primarily by sea and emanated from south Asia. Goods were carried across the Indian Ocean, around the southern Arabian Peninsula, past Yemen, and into the Red Sea. There, they were taken overland to Gaza or the ports of the Nile Delta.

At the end of each route were Italian merchants, primarily Genoese in the Black Sea and Venetians and Pisans in the Mediterranean, who carried the goods by ship to Italy, southern France, and Catalonia, where they were taken overland into northern Europe. In 1291,

the intra-European routes of this system were facilitated when Genoese ships sailed for the first time through the Straits of Gibraltar, north into the Atlantic, through the English Channel and into the North Sea ports of the Netherlands. By the fourteenth century, the entire system was relatively quick and efficient. *Y. pestis* could be carried either by the fleas and rats aboard the trading ships or, in the case of pneumonic plague, by the merchants themselves. By the 1340s, the Eurasian commercial network was sufficiently fluid for an epidemic to pass through it before the disease's carriers fell victim themselves.

Historians debate which of the three trading routes was most important in the spread of the Black Death. It is likely that the overland route through central Asia was most crucial, but the other two also played an important role in plague's spread, if not in its origins. For ships on these sea-based routes brought infected Asian black rats, plague's most prolific carriers, to the West.

The first records of the Black Death's westward movement are from 1339.⁶ Archaeological evidence shows that substantial portions of a Nestorian Christian community near Lake Issyk Kul, in the Tien Shan region of central Asia, died from bubonic plague. Narrative records show that later in the year plague reached Belasagun, Talas, and perhaps Samarkand, along the rivers Jaxartes and Oxus in Transoxiana. By 1345, it was at Sarai, a major trading center astride the Lower Volga. By 1346, it reached Astrakhan, the Caucasus, and Azerbaijan, and rumors of its devastation began to reach the ports of the Mediterranean. One chronicler claimed: "India was depopulated; Tartary, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia were covered with dead bodies; the Kurds fled in vain to the mountains. In Caramania and Caesaria [in Asia Minor] none were left alive."⁷

To most Westerners, Tartary and the Orient were remote areas inhabited by pagans and infidels. Strange things happened in such exotic places and there was no reason to think that similar disasters would strike the West. But in September 1345, the Black Death did come close to home. It reached the Crimea, along the northern coast of the Black Sea, where Italian merchants had a number of trading colonies.

Traditionally, the entry of the Black Death into Europe has been assigned to the Genoese settlements at Caffa. A street brawl between Christian merchants and the local Muslim residents degenerated into a war and, after some initial skirmishes, the Muslims sought help from the local Tatar lord. This lord, a Kipchak khan named Janibeg,

raised a large army and forced the Genoese to fortify their quarters in town. The Tatars laid siege to Caffa, but, in the course of the attack, plague erupted among their army. It decimated the besiegers and prompted Janibeg to share his woe; he ordered his surviving troops to load plague victims on catapults and toss them over Caffa's walls and into the citadel. Rotting bodies proliferated in the town, and the Black Death spread throughout. Finally, the Genoese were forced to flee. They took to their ships, sailed back to Italy, and introduced the Black Death into the Mediterranean Basin.

There are many implausible aspects to this traditional account. The first concerns the source, the Piacenzan chronicler, Gabriele de Mussis.⁸ He did not leave his home in Italy during the Black Death and seems to have picked up his story from returning sailors, not always a reliable source. More important, plague's complex etiology and the necessity of insect and rodent hosts or live human victims with pneumonic plague casts doubt on the role of catapulted bodies, however numerous they might have been. It is more likely that the urban Caffan rodent population was infected by its rural counterpart. But however accurate the particulars of Mussis's account, the story does tell a great deal about the mechanism of at least one of the plague strains which made up the Black Death. It moved overland until it reached the terminus of the trade route from Asia. Once there, it moved across the open sea in merchant ships and inland up rivers and across major highways; then it returned to attack areas it had initially bypassed. The importance of trade routes in facilitating the spread of the Black Death is shown by plague's progress in Christian Russia. Traveling north across the steppes from the Crimea, it had little direct contact with the Tatars. The Black Death would not get there until late 1350 or early 1351, and then it came from eastern Europe, not directly across the grasslands. In effect, the Black Death traveled not "as the bird flies," but via the circuitous loop of commercial routes.

The Black Death came to Constantinople late in 1347. Overlooking the Golden Horn and controlling the passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, Constantinople was the capital of the Byzantine Empire. It was one of the largest Christian cities in the world, with a population of well over 100,000 and perhaps as many as 250,000. Although not as impressive or important as it had been earlier in the Middle Ages, Constantinople was still a major commercial center and an important port of call for most Mediterranean merchants. The emperor, John Cantacuzenos, believed that the Black Death was divine punishment for aid the Byzantines and Genoese

had given to Muslims in capturing the Christian town of Romanis in Asia Minor. He described the impact of the plague in the eastern Mediterranean: "The plague attacked almost all the seacoasts of the world and killed most of their people. For it swept not only through Pontus, Thrace and Macedonia, but even Greece, Italy and all the islands, Egypt, Libya, Judea, Syria and spread throughout the entire world."

As Cantacuzenos suggested, the Black Death spread from Constantinople throughout the rest of Byzantium and the eastern Mediterranean Basin. The historian Nicephoros Gregoras, who survived the Black Death in Constantinople, wrote:

it invaded the Aegean Islands. Then it attacked the Rhodians . . . and those colonizing other islands. The calamity did not destroy men only but many animals living with and domesticated by man. I speak of dogs and horses [most authorities believe that *X. cheopis* will not attack horses] and all species of birds, even the rats that happened to live within the walls of the houses.¹⁰

Nicephoros' mention of rats is fascinating indeed, but he does not seem to have realized their overriding importance. Neither he nor any other Byzantine chronicler, physician, or theologian brought them up when discussing the Black Death's origins and causes.

It is difficult to measure quantitatively the impact of the Black Death on the Byzantine Empire. Recent research on peasant communities in Macedonia shows that there, as in much of the Christian world, the Black Death struck an already declining population.¹¹ Political instability and constant civil wars, military incursions by the Serbs and the Ottoman Turks, and economic domination by the Italians were all crucial in the decline. But the Black Death accelerated this drop in population and was by far the single most important blow. The Venetian observer who claimed that 90% of Constantinople's population perished surely exaggerated, but his impression provides a vivid image of plague's impact.

Italian merchants also brought the Black Death to the Muslim Mediterranean.¹² It probably reached Alexandria, the principal port of Egypt, in late autumn 1347. In its first few weeks, the Black Death killed between 100 and 200 people each day. Then, as the weather got colder, the plague got worse. Chroniclers tell of blood-spitting victims, a sign of deadly pneumonic plague, and mortality ran as high as 750 per day. By spring 1348, the death toll may have reached 1000 a day. Alexandria's population before the Black Death was probably about 100,000; it is not possible to compute the exact percentage of

those who died of plague, but the city did not approach its preplague population until the sixteenth century. Other places in the Nile Delta were also devastated. Damietta, an important fishing port, was especially hard hit. Gardens and fruit trees were allowed to dry up and fishermen stayed in port for weeks on end. In other Delta villages, the death rate was so great that law courts were suspended and wills could not be probated. In Bilbais, for example, bodies were piled in mosques and shops, and roads were littered with decaying cadavers. Some roads had so many bodies piled along their sides that bandits took to utilizing them to conduct ambushes.

From the Delta, the Black Death moved up the Nile, reaching Cairo by spring 1348 at the latest. Like Constantinople, Cairo was one of the largest cities in the world; with its extensive suburbs, it may have had 500,000 people. Throughout the rest of 1348, mortality in the city averaged at least 300 a day and, at peak periods of infection in late spring and early autumn, the daily death count may have reached 7000. One source even claims as many as 20,000 deaths on particular days. Everything was in chaos. There was a shortage of coffins, so the dead were borne on wooden planks. Funeral processions wound through the city continuously and, by autumn 1348, there were no more shrouds available in the city. Preachers and grave-diggers also were in short supply, leading to mass burials in large, open trenches. As in the Delta, there were so many dead that mosques and shops were piled high with bodies. Prices rose and begging in the streets became widespread.

Ibn Taghri Birdi, writing about a funeral during the plague epidemic of 1429 in Cairo, could easily have described a processional during the earlier visitation:

The child of an individual in our service . . . died, and we went out with him to the oratory. The boy was less than seven years old, and when we set him down to pray over him among the dead, a large number of others were brought, until their numbers were beyond counting. Then prayer was said over them all, and we went to take up the dead body, but found that someone else had taken him and left us another one of about the same age. His family took him up but did not become aware of it; I, however, perceived this and told a number of others; but we did not inform his parents of it and said: "Perhaps the one who took him will give him the best interment; there is no profit in talking about it—there would only be an increase in grief." But when the boy had been buried and the proprietors of the funeral office took up the bier they cried out and said: "This is not our bier; this is an old one and its furnishings also are worn out."¹³

In all, 200,000 Cairenes died, representing a third to two-fifths of the city's overall population; this death toll was greater than the total population of any Christian city, with the possible exceptions of Constantinople and Venice.

From Cairo, the Black Death spread throughout the Middle East. By February 1349, it had reached Aswan, along the Upper Nile. The following summer, in the nearby town of Asyūt, only 116 of 6000 people paid taxes. To the east, across the Sinai, the town of Gaza was struck in spring 1348. Gaza was the major market town in an important agricultural region, yet the food markets were closed for two months as a result of the plague. Gaza served as the gateway for plague into Palestine and Syria. A Cairene traveler in Jerusalem wrote the following account:

I asked him [a Jerusalemite] the reason for this [a feast], and he informed me that he had vowed during the epidemic that, if it was lightened and a day passed without having to pray for any dead, he would arrange a feast. He then said to me: "Yesterday, I did not pray for any dead, so I will give the promised feast." I found that those who I had known among the sheiks of Jerusalem had almost all ascended to God Almighty.¹⁴

In late 1348, the Black Death reached Antioch, a major commercial seaport with a preplague population of about 40,000. It is possible that plague was introduced not only from Palestine, but also through trading vessels from Constantinople, Cyprus, or Alexandria. Mortality may have exceeded 50% of the total population, and many residents were so frightened that they fled to the lands north of the city, where the Black Death had not yet arrived. Their flight, accompanied by the relentless movement of infected rodents, facilitated the spread of the Black Death. Some of the fleeing Antiochians died en route, and their horses returned to Antioch. Greedy townsfolk then followed the horses back to their former owners and stripped the victims of all their valuables. By early 1349, the Black Death had reached Damascus, one of the greatest cities in the Mediterranean Basin. Before the plague, it had between 80,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. Mortality from the Black Death was very high. At its peak, plague killed about 2000 people a day, and population fell to about 50,000, a loss of between 38% and 50%.

Good descriptions of plague's effect in other parts of the Islamic world are available. From Egypt and Palestine, the Black Death spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, eventually reaching Is-

lam's holiest city, Mecca. There are no reliable body counts, but all commentators agree that the death toll was very high. Interestingly, the presence of the Black Death in the sacred city provoked an important theological debate. The Prophet Mohammed had claimed that deadly diseases would never reach his Holy City. When plague did come, many Islamic scholars said it was because of the presence in Mecca of nonbelievers, a position that seemed to satisfy most of the Muslim faithful.

From the Muslim Middle East, the Black Death spread to North Africa, both overland and by ship from Egypt. It is likely, however, that the plague also came from the Christian parts of the Mediterranean Basin. Tunisia and Libya, in particular, had very close relations with Italian merchants from Pisa, Genoa, and Sicily. Under any circumstances, Tunis, probably North Africa's largest town, was struck in spring 1348. The historian Ibn Khaldūn estimated that, in May and June 1348, 1000 people perished each day. He believed that of all the peoples of North Africa, only the nomadic Berbers of the western desert escaped demographic disaster. His friend, the poet Abū I-Qāsim ar-Rahawī, wrote:

Constantly I ask God for forgiveness
Gone is life and ease
In Tunis, both in the morning and the evening
And the morning belongs to God as does the evening
There is fear and hunger and death
Stirred up by the tumult and pestilence.¹⁵

By 1349, the entire Islamic world had been engulfed by the Black Death. About a third of the general population and perhaps 40% to 50% of those living in towns had died. The effect was summed up by Ibn Khaldūn, both of whose parents perished:

Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limit of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, and dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to [the East's more affluent] civilization. It was

as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction and the world responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whoever is upon it.¹⁶

In the Christian parts of the eastern Mediterranean Basin, the effects of the Black Death were as bad as those in the Muslim world. After spreading the plague to Constantinople and throughout Byzantium, Italian ships carried *Y. pestis* to the island of Cyprus in late summer or early autumn 1347. Cyprus had suffered a series of natural disasters in 1347, including an earthquake and several tidal waves, but the Black Death was far worse. So high was mortality and so frightened were Christian Cypriots that they assembled all their Muslim prisoners and slaves and slaughtered them, lest the Muslims inherit the island in the wake of massive Christian deaths.¹⁷ When a merchant ship from Rhodes came to Cyprus in November 1347, the captain found no one in port and decided to go elsewhere. Somehow, however, fleas and rats infected with plague managed to get aboard. Plague broke out on the Rhodian ship and, after the ship landed in Antioch, spread throughout Syria.

It was from another Mediterranean island, Sicily, that the Black Death entered western Europe.¹⁸ The Genoese fleet reached Messina, the principal port in Sicily, early in October 1347. The Franciscan friar, Michael of Piazza, told of its effect. The Genoese were forbidden to stay but, as recounted in the introduction, they docked long enough to spread the plague. Within a few days, the Sicilian rodent and human populations had been infected and, by the middle of the month, the Black Death had spread throughout the island. It would be tedious to recount in detail the misfortunes of the Sicilians; they were depressingly similar to those suffered in the Byzantine Empire, the Middle East, and North Africa. Yet one incident does stand out. The town of Catania, about 55 miles south of Messina, is the second port on the island's eastern coast. A few sick Messinans made their way to the nearby town and were treated kindly by the Catanians. Many were even hospitalized, apparently at local expense. But the Catanians soon realized the virulence of the disease and the possibility that the very people they were helping might be carriers. According to Michael of Piazza, "they refused even to speak to any from Messina, or have anything to do with them, but quickly fled at their approach."¹⁹ A quarantine was imposed, but, as would be the case throughout Europe, it was designed to exclude people and not the rodents who were plague's principal disseminators. By the end of Octo-

ber, Catania was infected and, by early November, all of Sicily was stricken with the Black Death.

By December 1347, the Black Death had spread to southern Italy and much of southern Europe. Because Italy was the commercial center of the Mediterranean Basin, the Black Death entered from dozens—perhaps hundreds—of ports and fishing villages. This was important, for when plague was introduced into a region from a number of different points, it proved to be particularly deadly. The 1340s had been a difficult period. Northern and central Italy were the most urbanized parts of the West; the economies of the towns there depended on commerce, industry, and finance. The famines and food shortages of the early fourteenth century brought soaring food prices, which left people with less money to buy finished goods. This, combined with the insolvencies besetting many of Italy's banks, brought widespread political and social tensions. More than any other place in the West save France, Italy was in crisis before the Black Death. Still, the plague brought difficulties that no one could have imagined.

The principal points of entry in central and northern Italy were the great ports of Pisa and Genoa. Genoa was struck in late 1347.²⁰ Its population had been falling since 1315, but it was still around 100,000; testamentary evidence suggests a decline of 30% to 40%. Pisa, a town of perhaps 40,000, also lost between 30% and 40% of its population; more importantly, it served as the springboard for plague in Tuscany, Italy's most prosperous and heavily urbanized region.²¹ One of the first inland towns to be struck was Prato.²² A rich market town 40 miles from the sea, it had a preplague population of between 10,000 and 15,000. Notarial records of a wealthy merchant, Francesco di Marco Datini, suggest plague mortality of 40%. Depopulation brought a pronounced labor shortage and a subsequent boom in the slave trade. The traditional source of slaves for Italy was Circassia, many of whose inhabitants were light-skinned, light-eyed, and fair-haired. Most of them were Muslim, which prompted the Christian Church to allow their enslavement under the theory that their masters would have the opportunity to convert them to the "true" faith. But this boom was short-lived; like the rest of the Near East, Circassia was depopulated by the Black Death, leaving fewer people to be enslaved. The Datini records show that Italian merchants began to look to new areas, particularly Africa south of the Sahara Desert, an almost plague-free region from which Arab traders got their

slaves. Thus, European interest in Africa was renewed and the black slave trade began.

Like Prato, Pistoia was an important market center.²³ It was centrally located astride major commercial routes, with six highways converging on it, and served as a major communications and cultural center. It was therefore a prime candidate to receive the Black Death early and severely. Like Genoa and Pisa, Pistoia's population had declined from the famines of the early fourteenth century; it had dropped from 30,000 in 1240 to about 24,000 in 1348. But this general, rather gradual crisis was dramatically exacerbated by the Black Death. As soon as plague came in May 1348, a quarantine was imposed. Pistoian authorities believed, probably correctly, that the infection came from Pisa and Lucca, the latter a financial and textile-producing center to the southwest. Visits to, and visitors from, both places were banned, as were imports of textiles and foodstuffs. Crowds were not allowed to gather; even at funerals, attendance was limited to family members. When plague did come, church bells were stilled, lest their ringing disturb the afflicted. All was to no avail, however, and mortality was about 40%.

The Black Death came to Orvieto in April or May 1348 with the entourage of the Ambassador of Perugia, still another Tuscan town.²⁴ The records of Orvieto's medical community, which was quite sophisticated for the time, show how poorly equipped even the most advanced fourteenth-century communities were when dealing with plague. There was a single municipal physician, a single municipal surgeon, and 15 to 20 private doctors, all serving a population of 12,000 to 15,000. There were three hospitals—one public and two private—and a series of sanitation laws designed to curb industrial pollution. It was a comparatively good system, but it proved to be useless against a new, complex, lethal, and highly contagious disease such as plague. The Black Death raged throughout the spring and summer, during which time the weather may have been too warm to sustain bubonic or pneumonic plague. References to victims dying within 24 hours of infection suggest the presence of the deadly septicaemic strain, as does the general abatement in September and October, normally the peak season for bubonic plague. Mortality was so severe in summer that there appears to have been a substantial "die-off" before the optimal autumn season. Chroniclers claimed that 500 people perished each day; if this is correct, 3% to 4% of Orvieto's population died daily. This may well be exaggerated, but municipal records show that virtually no doctors could be found throughout the sum-

mer. So many notaries were killed that hundreds of business transactions became hopelessly entangled and had to be renegotiated after the epidemic. In all, close to half the population died.

The Black Death elicited different responses in different places. In Orvieto, it brought a religious revival. In 1349, at popular behest, the town fathers added 50 new religious dates to the municipal calendar. In 1350, which was a jubilee year, civic authorities abandoned traditional curfews and kept the town's gates open day and night so that pilgrims on their way to Rome might always be accommodated. There were more tangible displays of popular piety as well. Construction of a new cathedral was continued apace and, in the 1360s, hastened, despite a severe postplague depression in Orvieto's economy, a labor shortage, and soaring construction costs.

The rest of Tuscany suffered, too. Siena, 30 miles south of Florence, was one of Europe's most important banking centers.²⁵ The chronicler Agnolo di Tura (The Fat) wrote a vivid description of the Black Death:

The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed that almost everyone became stupified by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in their groins, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.²⁶

Agnolo believed that 52,000 Siennese died, surely an inflated figure since the town's population in 1348 could not have exceeded 60,000. But mortality was very high in any case, and about half of Siena's population succumbed.

Florence was one of Europe's most beautiful, illustrious, and prosperous cities, but it, too, had undergone food shortages, bank

failures, and political crises in the first half of the fourteenth century.²⁷ By 1348, it had about 80,000 inhabitants, down between 25% and 50% from 1300. The chronicler Giovanni Villani claimed that the Black Death reached Florence in late 1347, killed about 4000 people, and then diminished in virulence through the winter of 1348. In the spring, it struck with renewed fury. The classic description was written by the famous humanist Giovanni Boccaccio:

In . . . 1348 the deadly plague broke out in the great city of Florence. . . . Whether through the operation of the heavenly bodies or because of our own inequities, which the just wrath of God sought to correct, the plague had arisen in the east some years before, causing the death of countless human beings. It spread without stop from one place to another until, unfortunately, it swept over the west. Neither knowledge nor human foresight availed against it, although the city was cleansed of much filth by chosen officers in charge and sick persons were forbidden to enter it, which advice was broadcast for the preservation of health. Nor did humble supplication serve. Not once but many times there were ordained in the form of processions and other ways for the propitiation of God by the faithful, but in spite of everything, towards the spring of the year the plague began to show its ravages in a way just short of miraculous. It did not manifest itself as in the east, where, if a man bled at the nose he had certain warning of inevitable death. At the onset of the disease, both men and women were affected by a sort of swelling in the groin or under the armpits, which sometimes attained the size of a common apple or egg. Some of these swellings were larger and some were smaller, and all were commonly called boils. From these two starting points the boils began in a little while to spread and appear generally all over the body. Afterwards, the manifestations of the disease changed into black or lurid spots on the arms, the thighs and the whole person. In many ways, these blotches had the same meaning for everyone on whom they appeared. . . . Such was the cruelty of heaven and to a great degree of man that between March [1348] and the following July it is estimated that more than 100,000 human beings lost their lives within the walls of Florence, what with the ravages attendant on the plague and the barbarity of the survivors towards the sick. Who would have thought before the plague that the city held so many inhabitants?"

While Boccaccio's estimate of Florentine morbidity is too high, scholarly estimates range from 45% to an incredible 75% of Florence's total population. As much as a third of the city's population might have died in six months, and the immediate impact was enormous. Shops and factories closed, and prices for foodstuffs and basic commodities soared as the market system that brought goods in from

the surrounding countryside collapsed. The wealthy fled the city, doctors and apothecaries charged exorbitant fees for their services, and nearly empty streets resonated with the sound of carts and wagons assigned to pick up the dead. Boccaccio describes the scene in lurid terms:

It was common practice of most of the neighbors, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag corpses out of the houses with their hands . . . and to lay them in front of the doors, where anyone who made the rounds might see them, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count; afterwards, they would have biers brought up. . . . Nor was it once or twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once, but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, father and son, and so forth. And times without number it happened that, as two priests bearing the cross were on their way to perform the last office for someone, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in the rear, so that whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six to eight, or sometimes more. Nor for all their number were the obsequies honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners; rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be today."

Like their Siennese neighbors, many Florentines adopted an Epicurean attitude, drinking, reveling, and spending money. Parents abandoned children, husbands left wives, and sick relatives were forsaken. A group called the *becchini* appeared. They were usually men of lower social rank, often themselves afflicted with plague, who carted the dead and performed other tasks that no one else cared to do. Some of the *becchini* apparently turned to extortion, rape, assault, and even murder. They would force their way into the houses of the sick and threaten to carry away those still healthy unless certain demands were met. The *becchini* helped to keep the streets deserted. The chronicler Stefani claimed that the only sounds that could be heard came from carts—those of the rich, fleeing with their belongings, and those of the charnel crews, coming for the dead.

The experience of two other Italian cities, Venice and Milan, further illustrates the diverse effects of the Black Death. Venice was probably the largest and richest city in Europe.³⁰ Unlike most other towns in the Mediterranean Basin, it prospered right up to the onset of the Black Death. It had a preplague population of 120,000 to 150,000. Venice's prosperity was based on commercial success, par-

ticularly its dominance over trade in the eastern Mediterranean. It had a stable, conciliar, oligarchic government and a generally peaceful corps of industrial workers who were calmed by the highest wages in Europe. The oligarchy controlled production and marketing in several key industries, including shipbuilding and glassmaking, and put together an impressive schedule of trading ventures. The Venetians even had a maritime empire that included parts of the Black Sea, the Levant, Dalmatia, and several important Mediterranean islands. Like Orvieto, Venice had an elaborate system of sanitation and public health, including civic physicians and hospitals. With such an efficient governmental and medical organization, Venice was better prepared than any place in Christendom to deal with the plague. But plague proved to be as deadly in Venice as it was virtually everywhere else, and the city's most distinguished historian, F. C. Lane, wrote that the Black Death "dominated several centuries of Venetian demographic history."

Venetian galleys from Caffa probably brought plague late in 1347. It was most severe through the following winter and spring, killing close to 600 people a day. In March, Doge Andrea Dandolo and the Great Council established a sophisticated quarantine and prevention system. Certain barges were designated to ferry victims to special islands in the lagoon, and all dead were laid at least five feet deep in the earth. A general quarantine of up to 40 days was imposed on incoming ships, with violators facing penalties of death. Changes were made in the way medical professionals were allowed to operate. Surgeons, previously considered to be little more than craftsmen, were allowed to practice in the same fashion as university-trained physicians, a response to a condition in which "nearly all doctors withdrew on account of fear and terror." Such attempts to upgrade sanitary and medical systems were admirable, but, given the etiology of plague, doomed to failure. In Venice, where records were better kept and official figures more accurate than in any other town in Italy, Lane estimated that 60% of the total population died in the 18-month period beginning in December 1347.

Milan was the principal city on the Lombard plain.³¹ It controlled much of the overland Alpine trade with northern Europe and had close to 100,000 people in 1348. Like Genoa, Florence, Rome, and Venice, it was one of the major cities of Italy. Milan differed from the other centers, however, in the nature of its government. Its ruler was an absolute despot, a member of the Visconti family whose powers were more extensive than those of any contemporary ruler. When

news of the Black Death reached Milan, the Viscontis and their advisers acted quickly. Municipal authorities walled up those houses in which plague victims were discovered, isolating in them the healthy as well as the sick. So popular did this become that many householders followed suit, in some cases killing members of their own families. Given the plague's most common means of transmission, such measures should have had limited effect on mortality. Yet, Milan's death rate was less than 15%, probably the lowest in Italy save a few Alpine villages. But Milan was exceptional. Generally, Italy, Europe's commercial nexus, suffered as severely as it did because of its many points of entry for different strains of plague. Conservative estimates of mortality are about 33%, but many scholars believe that it reached 40% or even 50%. Taking into account the famines of the early fourteenth century, it is likely that the Italian population was reduced by 50%-60% from 1290 to 1360.

From Italy, the Black Death spread across the western Mediterranean Basin. By January 1348, it had reached Marseille, a principal French port. One authority claimed that it killed 50,000 people, a figure far too high since it probably exceeded Marseille's entire population.³² Nonetheless, the January inception date suggests pneumonic plague, raising the possibility of a death rate of 50% to 60%. Montpellier, the largest town in southern France, with a population of around 40,000; Narbonne, the second largest town, with perhaps 25,000 to 30,000 people; Carcasone; Toulouse; Montauban; and Bordeaux, the latter oriented toward the Atlantic rather than the Mediterranean—all were infected by summer 1348. Mortality in these towns averaged about 40% of the total population, but in select subpopulations it was even higher. In Montpellier, for example, only 7 of the 140 Dominican friars survived. At Marseille, the chroniclers claim that all 150 Franciscans perished or fled.

A careful study has been made of the effects of the Black Death at Perpignan.³³ Just north of the Spanish border, sandwiched between the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean, Perpignan had between 12,000 and 15,000 inhabitants. No figures for total mortality are available, but good data exist for select groups. Of 125 notaries, 45 survived. Only 1 of the 9 municipal physicians survived, and 16 of the 18 barber-surgeons died. Perpignan had a large Jewish community, from whom Christian neighbors were wont to borrow money. In January 1348, there are records of 16 such loans. In February, there were 25 and, in March, 32. In the first 11 days in April, there were 8, a bit low, but close to the norm. Then came the Black Death. There were

three more loans in April and not another financial transaction until the middle of August.

Avignon, about 50 miles north of Marseille on the Rhone River, was the seat of the papacy in 1348.³⁴ It was a congested but beautiful city with a highly transient population that could have fluctuated between 20,000 and 50,000. As a result of the papal residence, it was a very wealthy city and the center of considerable ecclesiastical, financial, and commercial activity. The Black Death probably appeared in winter 1348; as in Marseille, the inception date suggests the possible presence of pneumonic plague, an hypothesis borne out by extremely high mortality. Between February and May, up to 400 people a day died. In one six-week period, 11,000 people were buried in a single graveyard, at least 1 out of every 3 cardinals died, and total mortality probably exceeded 50%. Pope Clement VI behaved coolly and responsibly, as did most of the Avignonese clergy, but they had reason to panic; mortality among the clergy in general and those of Avignon in particular was among the highest in Europe. The English chronicler Henry Knighton claimed that 65 Carmelite Friars died in Avignon during the first week of the Black Death. Clement issued several bulls, urged calm, relaxed the rules for absolutism, and, after initially encouraging asceticism and processions, condemned the latter when they became too large and got out of hand. He issued bulls protecting the Jews and excoriating the flagellant movements which sprang up in central Europe, and solicited responsible medical opinion. Eventually, as mortality peaked late in spring, Clement took the advice of his doctor, Guy de Chauliac, and fled the city. He took refuge near the town of Valence, also along the Rhone, and returned to Avignon as soon as plague had subsided there.

Rural southern France was infected from the port towns, both by fleeing people and by the inexorable advance of rodent epizootics. In southern France, as in Italy, the Black Death exacerbated a bad situation. The famines of the early fourteenth century and the battles of the Hundred Years' War, many of which were fought there, had impoverished much of the countryside. In the county of Nice, for example, up to a third of the population had perished between 1300 and 1348. But, as was the case everywhere else, the Black Death was the worst disaster.³⁵ The province of Languedoc was perhaps the hardest hit. In Albi, a market district to the east of the Garonne River, evidence from a tax called the *compoix* shows a drop in the number of taxpayers from 10,000 in 1343 to 5000 in 1357. Of course, no one likes to pay taxes, and the decline in taxpayers might not be concomitant

with a 50% population decline. But in the rather large village of *Marsillargues*, which had a preplague population of about 1000, mortality from the Black Death was 50%. This was also the case in the township of *Ganges*, in the *Cevannes* along the *Herrault* River. In 1339, *Ganges* had over 300 electors in its local assembly; by 1350, there were less than 140 electors.

In all of Languedoc, one of the wealthier provinces in France, close to 50% of the population was killed during the Black Death, and the overall effect was disastrous. The market for agricultural products bottomed out, dealing a fatal blow to the specialized cash crops that had been one of the area's economic staples. Viticulture, for example, began a retreat that lasted well into the sixteenth century. Even the most basic agricultural activity, the cultivation of cereal crops, suffered from reduced demand. Languedoc, a region heavily dependent on its rural economy, suffered a condition historians call *Wüstungen*—the abandoning of arable and, in some cases, even of entire villages due to the depopulation brought by plague.³⁶ Furthermore, the devastation of Languedoc was not exceptional. In Provence, a wealthy region along the Rhone Valley, mortality from the Black Death was about 50%, with the death count in selected districts rising as high as 70%. Provence, too, suffered from *Wüstungen*, and the Black Death proved to be the most severe in a series of demographic setbacks that began in the late thirteenth century.

Like Italy, Iberia suffered the misfortune of receiving the Black Death from disparate sources.³⁷ There were at least three avenues of entry. First, plague came from the south, across the Straits of Gibraltar from the Moorish caliphates of North Africa to those of southern Iberia. Second, it came from the north, across the Pyrenees to the Basques-speaking villages. Third, and probably most important, merchant ships from Italy brought the Black Death to the Balearic Islands and then to the major ports of the west coast, Barcelona and Valencia. Like France, Iberia had been rent by incessant wars; when the Black Death erupted, the Christian Aragonese and Portuguese were at war, and the Castilians were fighting the Muslim Granadans. The army of Alfonso XI of Castile was besieging the fortress of Gibraltar when the Black Death struck both sides. Alfonso refused to leave his troops, came down with the plague, and died in March 1350, the only crowned head in Europe to die of the pestilence.

Gibraltar was one of the last places in Iberia to get the Black Death; the first reported cases were in spring 1348. Since there are no definitive data for Spain and Portugal, it is hard to measure precisely

the Black Death's demographic effect. Barcelona and Valencia were two of the largest towns in Spain, with preplague populations of perhaps 50,000 and 30,000, respectively; estimates of mortality for each range between 30% and 40%. For Aragon, Catalonia, Granada, and Portugal, plague mortality was about 30%. For Castile, parts of which were sparsely inhabited uplands, mortality seems to have been between 20% and 25%. Throughout Iberia, local institutions of justice and law enforcement broke down, and looters and criminal bands became ubiquitous. In a few instances, pilgrims to the shrine of St. James Compostela, one of Christendom's holiest shrines, were robbed or beaten. Royal authorities responded quickly and, like their clerical counterparts in Avignon, acted calmly and responsibly. Legislation was passed to control wages and prices, and transfers of food were arranged in order to alleviate local shortages. Pedro IV of Aragon even established a quarantine, a noble if ineffective attempt to isolate the Black Death to parts of his kingdom.

Royal efforts were also made to protect the Jews.³⁶ Iberia had one of the Mediterranean's largest and most successful Jewish populations and, despite sporadic incidents of anti-Semitism, the Jews had been treated better there than in any other part of the Christian world. Jews served in large numbers as royal tax collectors, physicians, apothecaries, interpreters, and managers of great estates throughout the Iberian Peninsula. The Black Death ended this toleration and began an era of virulent anti-Semitism, which ended with the elimination of the once prominent and prosperous Jewish community. Many Christians believed that the Jews brought on the Black Death by poisoning supplies of drinking water. This was an old idea. For example, in 1321 in Languedoc, a number of lepers had been accused of fouling the drinking supplies; as they were being executed, several cried out that they had been encouraged in their deed by Jews. This idea became current again in 1348. In the German town of Neustadt, after being broken on the rack, a Jewish physician named Balovignus confessed that he had indeed poisoned local wells. He claimed that a Jewish boy had been sent to him by the chief rabbi of Toledo, Spain. The boy had carried a powder which, on pain of excommunication, Balovignus was to use to contaminate the wells. This he did, after warning his co-religionists. Word spread from Germany, and pogroms erupted wherever there were Jews. Many Spaniards did not need the excuse of the wells. The general breakdown of law and order made Jews especially vulnerable, particularly if they were wealthy. The kings of Castile and Aragon moved quickly to protect

their Jewish subjects, but it took two years to reestablish normal police and judicial authority. By that time, Iberia's Jewish community had been decimated to one-quarter its former size.

By 1350, the Black Death had run its course in the Mediterranean Basin. Between 35% and 40% of the overall population had perished. The crisis brought on by the plague was summarized by the Florentine chronicler Villani:

Having grown in vigor in Turkey and Greece and having spread thence over the whole Levant and Mesopotamia and Syria and Chaldea and Cyprus and Rhodes and all the islands of the Greek archipelago, the said pestilence leaped to Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica and Elba, and from there soon reached all the shores of the mainland. And of eight Genoese galleys which had gone to the Black Sea only four returned, full of infected sailors, who were smitten one after the other on the return journey. And all who arrived at Genoa died, and they corrupted the air to such an extent that whoever came near the bodies died shortly thereafter. And it was a disease in which there appeared certain swellings in the groin and under the armpit, and the victims spat blood, and in three days they were dead. And the priest who confessed the sick and those who nursed them so generally caught the infection that the victims were abandoned and deprived of confession, sacrament and medicine, and nursing. . . . And many lands and cities were made desolate. And the plague lasted till _____"

Villani purposely left a blank near the end of the sentence. He planned to fill in a date after the Black Death disappeared, but he was unable to do so. Villani died in the *annus terribilis* of 1348.

plague first worked its way into the West in 1346. But *Y. pestis* seems not to have crossed the steppes directly into the northern forest areas, controlled by the Duke of Muscovy and other Christian rulers. Rather, the Black Death made its way into Russia via the long, circuitous route from Caffa to Italy, through France, and across Germany, Poland and Lithuania; it probably did not reach Russia until late autumn 1350 or early 1351. Plague was not new to Russia in the mid-fourteenth century, for it was one of the few noncoastal parts of Europe in which periodic plague epidemics had struck between the first and second pandemics. For example, there had been an epidemic in the town of Smolensk, on the Dnieper River, which the chroniclers claimed had killed 32,000 people, a figure far too great since it was probably three times the entire town population.⁴² An epidemic in Kiev in 1290 was said to have killed 7000 people in two weeks, still too inflated a figure to be taken at face value, but useful for the impression it must have made on contemporaries. As with the rest of eastern Europe, there are no reliable data for plague morbidity in Christian Russia. But chroniclers agreed that the Black Death was the worst epidemic on record, striking towns and countryside with equal fury, and allegedly destroying the entire populations of two towns. In Russia, as virtually everywhere else, the Black Death was the greatest demographic disaster ever.

CHAPTER 5

The Immediate Consequences

BY THE END OF 1351 the Black Death had run its course. It is not possible to give a definitive figure for plague mortality, but all of Eurasia and that part of Africa north of the Sahara were afflicted; the most current estimates of morbidity in Europe range between 25% and 65%. Contemporaries were of a like mind.¹ In 1351, agents for Pope Clement VI calculated the number of dead in Christian Europe at 23,840,000. With a preplague population of about 75 million, Clement's figure accounts for mortality of 31%—a rate about midway between the 50% mortality estimated for East Anglia, Tuscany, and parts of Scandinavia, and the less-than-15% morbidity for Bohemia and Galicia. And it is unerringly close to Froissart's claim that "a third of the world died," a measurement probably drawn from St. John's figure of mortality from plague in the Book of Revelations, a favorite medieval source of information.

There were immediate and pronounced consequences from such enormous population losses, the first and most obvious of which were on human behavior and psychology. The shock was immense, and the mechanics and commonplaces of everyday life simply

stopped, at least initially. When plague came, peasants no longer ploughed, merchants closed their shops, and some, if not all, churchmen stopped offering last rites. Many of the responses were described by Boccaccio in *The Decameron*:

Because of such happenings and many others of a like sort, various fears and superstitions arose among the survivors, almost all of which tended toward one end—to flee from the sick and whatever had belonged to them. In this way each man thought to be safeguarding his own health. Some among them were of the opinion that by living temperately and guarding against excesses of all kinds, they could do much toward avoiding the danger; and in forming a band they lived away from the rest of the world. Gathering in those houses where no one had been ill and living was more comfortable, they shut themselves in. They ate moderately of the best that could be had and drank excellent wines, avoiding all luxuriousness. With music and whatever other delights they could have, they lived together in this fashion, allowing no one to speak to them and avoiding news of either death or sickness from the outer world.

Others, arriving at a contrary conclusion, held that plenty of drinking and enjoyment, singing and free living and the gratification of the appetite in every possible way, letting the devil take the hindmost, was the best preventative of such a malady; and as far as they could, they suited the action to the word. Day and night they went from one tavern to another, drinking and carousing unrestrainedly. At the least inkling of something that suited them, they ran wild in other people's houses, and there was no one to prevent them, for everyone had abandoned all responsibility for his belongings as well as for himself, considering his days numbered. Consequently, most of the houses had become common property and strangers would make use of them at will whenever they came upon them even as the rightful owners might have done. Following this uncharitable way of thinking, they did their best to run away from the infected.

Meanwhile, in the midst of the affliction and misery that had befallen the city, even the reverend authority of divine and human law had almost crumbled and fallen into decay, for its ministers and executors, like other men, had either died or sickened, or had been left so entirely without assistants that they were unable to attend to their duties. As a result, everyone had leave to do as he saw fit.

Many others followed a middle course, neither restricting themselves in their diet, like the first, nor giving themselves free rein in lewdness and debauchery like the second, but using everything in sufficiency, according to their appetites. They did not shut themselves in, but went about some carrying flowers in their hands, some fragrant herbs, and others of various kind of species which they frequently smelled, thinking it good

comfort the brain with such odors, especially since the air was oppressive and full of the stench of corruption, sickness, and medicines.

Still others, of a pitiless though perhaps more prudent frame of mind, maintained that no remedy against plagues was better than to leave them miles behind. Men and women without numbers, encouraged by this way of thinking and caring for nobody but themselves, abandoned the city [Florence], their houses and estates, their own flesh and blood even, and their effects, in search of a country place—it made no difference whether it were their own or their neighbor's. It was as if [they believed that] God's wrath in seeking to punish the iniquity of men by means of plague could not find them out wherever they were, but limited itself to doom only those who happened to be found within the walls of the city. They reasoned as though its last hour had struck, and therefore no one ought to be there.

Although the members of the different factions did not all perish, neither did they all escape. On the contrary, many in each group sickened everywhere, and since they themselves had set the example to those who had been spared, they were abandoned to their lot altogether.²

Of all these reactions, the Epicurean response, perhaps because of a macabre attraction for the dissolute, seems to stand out. Indeed, the pursuit of pleasure is the theme of *The Decameron*. The setting of the stories is fourteenth-century Florence; ten young people fleeing from the Black Death take turns telling tales, most of them bawdy and irreverent, to amuse themselves. Through all of plague's devastation, the revelers accept and observe the basic tenets and trappings of Christianity, and in many ways follow the rules of good Christian conduct. They are of the upper classes and do not question the hierarchy and order of temporal life. They do not seem to doubt the ultimate truth of the Christian faith and the dogmas of the church. Yet, the accepted Christian trifunctional scheme has changed somewhat. While none of the characters question God's omnipotence, many believe that their future is determined, not by their own actions—one of the tenets of the Roman Church—but by fate, luck, and chance. Good fortune was keenly sought as a sign of divine blessing. Boccaccio's characters valued qualities far different from those esteemed by most of their predecessors. Piety, martial or mechanical skills, scholarly intelligence were not emulated; rather, wit and cleverness were venerated as essential to success. The cuckold, not the cheat, the liar, or the coward, was reviled; the seducer, not the pious schoolman or brave knight, was admired. Rewards and triumph went to the active, to those who helped themselves. The Black Death, at least among a substantial portion of the most vigorous members of society, brought

not so much a stoic acceptance of pain and suffering as it did a desire for an active, temporal life.

The Decameron is not the only example of popular literature reflecting the new values. Within a generation, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which expressed a perspective on life and values similar to that of *The Decameron*, had as much impact on the English reading public as Boccaccio's tales had had in Italy.³ The new psychology was persistent. A century later, in France, the works of François Villon embodied the same spirit and espoused the same values.⁴ Villon was a common criminal and vagrant, yet he was a brilliant poet; he used the traditional preplague forms and motifs, but his tone and attitudes were those of the new era. He was bitter and savage in his criticism, and he could be devastatingly sarcastic. Villon was superstitious, fascinated with death, afraid of the pains of hell, but hellbent on enjoying life and experiencing as much as he possibly could. It would be an oversimplification to explain late medieval hedonism solely in terms of the Black Death and the second pandemic, but to plague must go a substantial portion of the responsibility.

Epicureanism seems to have been especially strong among the most influential members of society, particularly the aristocracy and the intelligentsia, and its persistence made for a profound and prolonged moral crisis. Some scholars believe that such a crisis was well underway in 1347 and may have begun with the subsistence economy of the mid-thirteenth century; but all believe that the Black Death, as in so many other concurrent crises, made this one far more pronounced than it had been. Much of the old corporate cooperation and camaraderie were swept away, replaced in many cases by a strong strain of individualism. In some places, this would develop in constructive ways: witness the humanism of late-fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, or the pietism and mysticism of the Rhineland and the Netherlands at about the same time. But, in the decade after the Black Death, individualism generally was directed towards self-aggrandizement and the pursuit of leisure and pleasure. The collective institutions and the old communality—both rural and urban—so characteristic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were shattered. Old social, religious, and even familial bonds were relaxed. Restoring these bonds was the challenge that faced the people of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Among the psychological changes brought by plague was a new sense of time, especially among the bourgeoisie.⁵ Traditionally, merchants and churchmen had had a different sense of the temporal. To

the churchman, time was infinite, the domain of God. To the merchant, time was finite, a function of distance—for example, the number of days it would take for a ship to sail from Genoa to Bruges—or of changing seasons—for example, the number of days before the Alpine passes would become impassable. Time was money, an attitude that caused considerable consternation among the clergy and prompted theologians to condemn the practice of usury. They argued that usury and all commercial ventures were suspect because they assumed control over the future, a mortgage of time which was reserved for God.

The Black Death changed this; it brought a sense of urgency, especially in urban areas. The work day was extended and night work became common as merchants sought greater profits and workers, higher wages. For example, in Ghent and several other Flemish towns, as the Black Death diminished in late 1349, textile laborers demanded that they be allowed to determine their hours. Clocks and the rhythmic chimes of bells became more important than ever. In 1355, the royal governor of Artois authorized the people of Aire-sur-la-Lys to build a belfry whose bells would sound the hours for textile workers and merchants. Conditions were similar throughout the urban areas of Europe. In Italy, a Florentine humanist thought every library should have a clock. One of the most cogent comments about time was made by the humanist Leon Battista Alberti in his dialogue on family life:

GIANOZZO: There are three things which man may say properly belong to him; his fortune, his body, . . .

LIONARDO: And what may the third be?

GIANOZZO: Ah! A very precious thing indeed! Even these hands and these eyes are not so much my own.

LIONARDO: Incredible! What is it?

GIANOZZO: Time, my dear Lionardo.⁶

By the end of the century, "merchant's time," rather than "the traditional conception of time in Christian theology," became the rule.⁷

Such psychological changes had a pronounced effect on late medieval religion. The depth of both Christian and Muslim religious feeling in the West was one of the foundations of society. Followers of both faiths counted the hereafter more important than life on earth and, given the difficulties and brevity of earthly existence, salvation became paramount. The clergy claimed to be the conduit to salvation and thus held a special position. The Black Death—that sudden, pre-

capitous, painful, and omnipresent killer—intensified the medieval preoccupation with death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Death seemed nearer, and salvation more important, than ever, and the clergy were put to a real test. If, in one fashion or another, they acted responsibly and were able to relieve the anxiety—and, in some cases, hysteria—of their flocks, their position would be strengthened. If not, the faithful would follow another path to heaven.

Generally speaking, both Islamic and Christian holy men failed the test. Muslim theologians, following long-standing doctrine, offered their followers three tenets.⁸ First, the faithful should not flee the Black Death, but rather, should stay and accept Allah's will. Second, death by plague was martyrdom, a mercy for the true believer and a punishment for the infidel. Third, in a direct rebuttal of over a thousand years of accepted wisdom, the theologians denied the general medical opinion that plague was a contagious infection transmitted from person to person. They stated that it was foolish to flee from the Black Death because it was God, not men, who disseminated the disease. And there was another reason to reject the advice of doctors; God was good, and contagion was simply incompatible with His very being.

A few theologians broke with this general perspective and took a less benevolent view of the Black Death. They believed that the plague was a punishment visited on man by God because they had strayed from the straight and narrow path of true belief. This theory was taken from Old Testament exegesis, drawing heavily on examples such as God's punishment of the pharaohs. Most Islamic clerics told their followers that God was merciful toward the true believer, and that, like death in battle, plague was a mercy in its own right, insuring that the victim would gain salvation.

The martyrs and those who died in their beds argue with Our Lord about those who were killed by plague. The martyrs say, our brothers died as we died. The deceased, on their beds, say, our brothers died on their beds as we died. Our Lord said: "Consider their wounds, which resemble the wounds of the slaughtered, and they are among us." And behold, their wounds had been similar, so they joined the martyrs.⁹

For many of the Islamic faithful, such injunctions must have been all the comfort necessary. But, for others, they were not. The Islamic medical community offered extensive advice, despite condemnation and ridicule by the mullahs and, judging from the popularity of med-

ical works, many Muslims must not have been content with a fatalistic acceptance of God's judgment. Perhaps even more significant as a barometer of popular dissatisfaction with the Islamic clergy—after all, only a small, literate elite was able to afford and read medical treatises—was the spread among the lower classes of a kind of magic designed to ward off plague, or cure those who had already contracted it. The magic consisted mostly of special prayers using numbers or incantations, and talismans and amulets, particularly those made from gold or silver. Hex signs were popular, too, especially when carved in sapphires or ivory. All were considered to be prophylaxes and, as such, were uniformly condemned by the clergy, who claimed that such symbols were an insult to God. But their popularity persisted, another affront and challenge to the authority of the mullahs.

The damage inflicted on the Christian clergy was far more substantial.¹⁰ In part, this was because the Christian institutional, hierarchical bureaucracy was more extensive than that of Islam; in part, it was because the institutional Christian Church had begun to decline at least two generations before the Black Death, at the time of the pontificate of Boniface VIII (1294–1303). The papacy became increasingly secular, preoccupied with fiscal gain and political advantages, and pretentious in its claims to universal power. It lost a series of battles with secular heads of state. In 1309, the seat of the papacy was moved from Rome to Avignon—a city under the legal auspices of the German emperor, but geographically and culturally French. Prior to this move, the bishop of Rome had been pope precisely because he was heir to St. Peter and the keys to the kingdom. In Avignon he had no such ties and was perceived by many Christians, figures of authority and common folk alike, as a creature of the king of France. In general, the papacy had grown ever more temporal from the early thirteenth century. It was increasingly concerned with fiscal gain and secular political advantages, and, at the very least, it gave the appearance of neglect in spiritual things. This aspect of papal decline preceded the Black Death and was largely extraneous to the effects of depopulation. Further, most historians believe that, as a group, the Avignonese popes were of high caliber. Clement VI, for example, acted coolly and responsibly during the Black Death, waiting himself until the last minute to flee from the plague, and then doing so only on the advice of his doctor. However, when the Black Death brought the crisis of the imperial Christian Church to a head and provided it with as stiff a challenge as it had had since its earliest days, both its

spiritual and educational offices were found wanting. Christians did not abandon their faith, but many of them sought alternative paths to spiritual peace and salvation.

The principal failure of the Christian Church was in not providing the necessary solace or support during the crisis. This failure took two forms. First, except for parts of northern Italy, the church supervised the education and licensing of physicians, almost all of whom were clerics. There were surgeons, apothecaries, and nonprofessional practitioners whose training and practice lay outside church jurisdiction, but they had little to do with the theories and tractates about infectious disease that flooded Europe after 1347. In the long run, virtually all medical advice proved to be useless. As the church would have taken credit had its physicians been able to assuage the pain of plague, so it was to shoulder much of the blame when they failed.

Second and more important, the church did not provide adequate spiritual comfort. Many parish priests fled, leaving no one to offer services, deliver last rites, and comfort the sick. Flight might have been intellectually explicable, but it was morally inexcusable. In the English dioceses of York and Lincoln, close to 20% of the parish priests in certain deaneries fled the Black Death.¹¹ Two popular north country verses expressed this discontent:

You pope-holy priests, full of presumption
With your wide furred hoods void of discretion
Unto your own preaching of contrary condition
Which causes the people to have less devotion.¹²

[He] who reserves a benefice for richness and ease
Should have his living in sickness
Rather than serve God as he pleases
He serves it or misses.¹³

In *Piers Ploughman*, William Langland wrote:

So we need an antidote strong enough to reform these prelates who should pray for peace but are hindered by their possessions. Then take their land from them, you nobles, and let them live on their tithes! For surely, if property is a deadly poison that corrupts them, it would be good for Holy Church's sake to relieve them of it, and purge them of this poison before it grows more dangerous. . . .

Every bishop who carries a crozier is thereby bound to travel through his diocese and show himself to his people. And he must teach them to believe in the Three Persons of the Godhead, and feed them with spiritual food and provide for the poor. For it is men like you bishops that

Isiah and Hosea are referring when they say that no one should be ruler, unless he has both bodily and spiritual food to give to the needy: "In my house is neither bread nor clothing; make me not a ruler of the people."¹⁴

Given all these circumstances, it is not surprising that many Christians continued to follow their own path to salvation even after the plague had subsided and their priests had returned.

One direction the faithful took was a strong reinforcement of the traditional idea that works, as well as faith, would help in attaining salvation. To gain relief from the suffering of plague and to attain salvation were like climbing a ladder; the good Christian moved from rung to rung. It was a painful process that was fraught with temptation, and the seeker was always in danger of slipping. But the faithful could be boosted up as well, aided by various acts of benevolence. One of the most popular of these good works was pious charity, which blossomed after the Black Death and remained popular until the early sixteenth century.¹⁵ In England, about a quarter of all testators' estates, land and movables, went to good works. Hospitals benefited. In France, donations to existing institutions rose about 50% from 1300 to 1350; in England, 70 new foundations were laid between 1350 and 1390. Family chapels were another favorite bequest and, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a marked rise in the number of private masses and chantry priests. This, in turn, was a reflection of the increased popularity of the concept of purgatory, that halfway house where those who would eventually be saved were made to serve time in hell-like conditions in order to purge themselves of sin before they were permitted to enter heaven. Time in purgatory could be shortened by private masses or any number of good works.¹⁶ This charity system of private worship played a large role in late medieval religion and represented a considerable blow to monopoly over church services held by the traditional Christian hierarchy.

Charity was important for another reason. In the dislocation that followed the Black Death, many ecclesiastical institutions could not make ends meet. In a 1360 letter to the pope, an English bishop described the acute cash shortage in many houses and estates in the wake of the plague:

Many of the houses, barns, and buildings erected by the earl have been in great measure ruined by the frequent overflowing of the Thames and by storms; that on account of diverse pestilence in times past they have suffered from a lack of tenants and cultivators and a murrain among

their cattle, sheep and horses; that on account of the numerous bequests [from] both rich and poor, the priory being held by the highways and near [a castle] and of other causes beyond their control, their revenues are greatly reduced.¹⁷

In some case, pious charity was the only income religious houses had for years after the Black Death. Because of the reduction of population by a third or more, the total sums received might well have been down, and there were some projects—the cathedrals at Siena and Winchester, for example—that could not be finished even with new infusions of charitable bequests. However, the tangible display of good works exerted a strong pull and, at least in England and Italy, per capita bequests were much higher in the 1350s than they had been earlier in the fourteenth century. In London, before 1348 about 5% of all testators registering their wills in the Hustings Court provided funds for hospitals. Between 1350 and 1360, this tripled, and the amount of the average bequest increased by almost 40%. Charity, especially to hospitals, was an opportunity for a twofold response to the Black Death. It provided for an institution that helped plague victims and it was the kind of good work that counted toward salvation, but could be done directly, without clerical involvement.

Another popular “good work” was pilgrimage to a religious shrine.¹⁸ Here, too, the faithful were performing a religious act directly, using a saint rather than a priest to intercede in their behalf. Pilgrimage could be undertaken to a place of the first rank, such as Rome, Jerusalem, or St. James Compostela in Galicia, or to one of innumerable local shrines that contained relics or anything else of religious importance. All sorts of people—“base-born men and nobles alike”—went, some singly and others in groups that often were sponsored by another late medieval religious phenomenon, the confraternities. These were religious groups dedicated to good works, among other things. Pilgrimage was not an easy undertaking. Given the deplorable condition of late medieval roads and the threat of brigands and pirates, it was a very dangerous task. As such, it was considered one of the most important good works and counted a great deal toward salvation. Wills from England and Italy showed a marked upsurge in the number of bequests for pilgrims and pilgrimages. In the 1350s and 1360s, there was a glut of travel guidebooks—some sober and earnest, others fabricated and sensational—which describe the process of pilgrimage and tell the pilgrim where to stop to eat and spend the night, and even the proper way to venerate particular saints. Sir John Mandeville’s *Travels*, written in 1357, was the most

popular of these guides. Over 300 manuscript copies made between 1357 and 1500 have survived to the present day. By 1500, it had been translated from the original French into Latin, English, High and Low German, Danish, Czech, Italian, Spanish, and Irish Gaelic.¹⁹ By the late fourteenth century, many municipalities were making official arrangements and accommodations for tourists. There was even something offered by authorities in Venice which might well be called a “package tour,” complete with safe conduct passes and arranged housing. In many ways, pilgrimage represents all the changes, good and bad, which the Black Death brought to religion—the passion to do good deeds, the strong conviction that this would help to attain salvation, and the decision to take part of one’s fate in one’s own hands, combined with the frivolity and lightheartedness so evident in Chaucer’s brightest pilgrim, the Wife of Bath.

Plague also brought more sudden changes to late medieval Christianity. A cult of new saints arose.²⁰ They were generally poor men recognized by the church hierarchy with great reluctance. The best example is St. Roch. Before the Black Death, the patron saint to call upon in case of plague was St. Sebastian. Shot to death in the third century by order of Emperor Diocletian, Sebastian was first connected with the disease when the arrows that riddled his body were alleged to be analogous to “darts of plague.” In the sixth century, during the first plague pandemic, Sebastian acquired a prominent position in Christianity’s pantheon of saints. Roch was a resident of Montpellier. During the successive epidemics of the late fourteenth century, he devoted his life to nursing poor victims. Humble and poor himself, seen by many as working outside the auspices of the hierarchical church, Roch was beatified and then invoked with Sebastian in times of plague.

The idealized selfless image of the Christian clergy suffered during and after the Black Death.²¹ Many people believed, often unjustly, that the clergy were greedy, self-centered, and filled with a sense of their own importance. It must be stressed, however, that while confidence in the institutional church waned, faith in Christianity itself did not; rather, the imminence of death, brought closer than ever by plague, made the need for salvation more pressing. One consequence was the spread of mysticism and lay piety. Mystics, the most famous of whom were Meister Eckhart, John Ruysbroek, John Tauler, and Henry Suso, believed that God lived in every individual and that His presence was felt in proportion to one’s ability to suppress intrinsic material and sensual inclinations and subject one’s will

to that of God. Obedience, self-denial, and prayer were crucial. Lay piety expressed itself in organizations such as the Brethren of Common Life, formed in the Netherlands in the late fourteenth century. Aside from their profound sincerity, the most striking characteristic of mysticism and lay piety was the lack of need for a formal clergy to lead the way to paradise. Many postplague Christians felt they could communicate directly with God.

It is tempting to tie the decline of the institutional church to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, as many historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have done.²² Such a direct connection, spanning close to 200 years, is a bit presumptuous. The Christian Church had many problems before the advent of the second plague pandemic. It was a huge, unwieldy, and vastly complicated institution, and, even at its nadir, there was much about it that was good. But the Black Death made an issue of the proper function of the clergy. It made people ever more conscious of the omnipotence of God and the inevitability of Judgment Day. A poorly behaved clergy made many people wonder about alternative means of salvation. Perhaps the best link between the Black Death, the decline of Holy Mother Church, and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century was the growing role of indulgences in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Attuned to the anxieties of their flock, churchmen redoubled the emphasis on good works. From the 1350s, apparently on papal orders, new stress was put on indulgences, or grants of time off from purgatory bestowed by the church, which drew on what it termed a "treasury of merits," or good deeds accumulated from Christ, the patristic fathers, and saints. Indulgences were not given freely, but usually in anticipation of a gift of money; always mindful of turning a profit, church leaders began to sell them in increasing numbers to a richer public. While indulgences were not the only thing that spurred Martin Luther, their use and sale inspired him to nail up his 95 Theses.

There were other changes in attitude brought by the Black Death. As stressed earlier, life took on more violent and emotional overtones.²³ Death was closer and life seemed even more tenuous than it had before the plague. As a result, virtually all of life's experiences, good and bad, were felt with more intensity and passion. Emotion, quick reaction, and spontaneity played key roles. A case in point was a homicide in the Benedictine Abbey of St. Edmunds, in England, in the 1360s.²⁴ Three monks, John de Norton, John de Grafton, and William Blundeston, quarreled among themselves. That night, as

most of the monks slept, Grafton crept through the abbey dormitory and stabbed Norton to death. When the other monks awakened and discovered the body, they panicked. Instead of informing civil or even church authorities, they decided to bury the corpse without calling in the coroner, a violation of the law. But the body was poorly hidden in a shallow grave in the church cemetery, and Abbot John de Brinkeley soon discovered it. Fearing an adverse reaction from local townspeople, with whom the monks were involved in a series of disputes, Brinkeley began his own investigation of the incident. Both Grafton and Blundeston were discovered and imprisoned, the latter having acted as an accessory in the crime. But the imprisonment proved to be a sham. Within a year, both men were pardoned by King Edward III without ever having been brought to trial, based on the royal assumption that the crime was committed in "hot blood," and was thus explicable. The implication of the pardon is that such violence occurred with some regularity.

Much of the cruelty and violence, as well as the piety and joy, of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be understood only by keeping in mind the new omnipresence of plague and the possibility of sudden, painful death. In the High Middle Ages, an era of expansion and fruition, literature and art expressed a buoyant optimism. After the Black Death, this was replaced by a pervasive pessimism. In addition to the carefree tone of some of the works of Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Villon, a sense of melancholy entered the literature. A good example is the poetry of Eustace Deschamps:

Happy is he who has no children, for babies mean nothing but crying and stench; they give only trouble and anxiety; they have to be clothed, shod and fed; they are always in danger of falling and hurting themselves; they contract some illness and die. When they grow up, they may go bad and be put in prison. Nothing but cares and sorrows; no happiness compensates us for our anxiety, for the trouble and expense of their education. The poet has no word.²⁵

People were fascinated by death.²⁶ Preachers advised people to go to sleep every night as if it were their last and as if their beds were their tombs. The frailty of human life and the brevity of earthly glory were stressed. Ascetic mediation was best because everyone ended up as dust and worms. Putrefaction was evidence of sin; only saints' bodies did not decompose. In the Early and High Middle Ages, people accepted the inevitability of death and prepared for it, but they were rarely preoccupied with it. Burials were often in common

graves, and elaborate tombs were rather rare. The Black Death changed all this. Funerals became festivals, the greatest event of a lifetime. Whenever possible, individual graves were dug so that "each body could have an eternal resting place." Funerary monuments were comparatively scarce before the Black Death, even among the nobility. In England, when they were used, funereal brasses usually showed a lord and his lady bedecked in all their finery. After the plague, funerary monuments and death masks became common, and their themes changed. Many brasses showed shrouded, macabre corpses or skeletons with snakes and serpents surrounding and protruding from their bones; on their faces were grisly, toothy smiles. Tombs in the Netherlands showed hideous images of naked corpses with tightly clenched hands, rigid feet, gaping mouths, and bowels filled with worms. In Germany, woodcuts called "The Art of Dying" appeared. They were linked panels showing the drama of death. Death was painful—in contrast to the peaceful slumber of years past—and people were to tremble at its coming. All this marked the appearance of the *ars moriendi*, the cadaver and death as a major motif in art and literature.

Perhaps the best examples of this preoccupation with the motifs of death and despair were in the fine arts.²⁴ Tuscany was Europe's financial center. Its old ruling bourgeoisie had been imbued with a sense of independent inquiry in the arts, a natural outgrowth of the competitive economic system it had mastered. The members of this class were self-confident, wealthy, and, in some cases, keen patrons. The art they wanted was "new" (e.g., that of Giotto and Cimabue), uplifting, optimistic, and, above all, individualistic. This bourgeois elite believed that it could enjoy temporal life without endangering its chances for salvation.

The Black Death changed this. Tuscany was devastated, losing half its population. Further, there was considerable redistribution of the population that remained. Peasants fled from the countryside, which was beset by a drop in food prices, a temporary breakdown of local authority, and omnipresent criminal bands and mercenaries, for the economic opportunity and comparative stability of large urban centers such as Florence and Siena. Many of the new urban dwellers made their fortunes and, following the examples of the old elite, became patrons of the arts. But, even for them and the better-established patrons, the old optimism had been shaken, and it was diminished further with each new epidemic. Tastes were changing. The new patrons were more conservative and had doubts about their material-

ism, their goals, and sometimes even their success, in view of the new preoccupation with salvation. They were becoming increasingly guilty and introspective.

There were changes in the artists as well as the patrons.²⁵ The Black Death killed many individual artists and, in some cases, entire schools or guilds of painters, sculptors, and masons who had been inspired by similar themes and hence worked together. This not only eliminated some of Europe's greatest masters, but it made it very difficult to train and develop new talent. A good example comes from England, where thirteenth-century guilds of artists produced superb miniatures. The Black Death killed off such a great number of these artists that no new masters appeared, and the English could not maintain their standards in this special art form.

The effects of new patrons and artists were visible immediately. Preplague Tuscan art was warm and sympathetic. It stressed personal relationships and, when it dealt with religious themes, emphasized the humility of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Postplague art, like postplague thought and funerary monuments, was obsessed with the most gruesome aspects of pain, and with the image of death. This new image can be seen in many forms, one of the best examples being Francesco Triani's great fresco, "The Triumph of Death," in the Camposanto in Pisa, painted around 1350. Death is shown, not as an airy skeleton, as was usually the case before the Black Death, but rather, as a horrible old woman cloaked in black, with wild, snakelike hair, bulging eyes, clawed feet with talons, and a scythe to collect her victims, whom she feeds to snakes and toads. Death was like a bird of prey, sweeping down on its victims. A similar scene by Orcagni at St. Croce, Florence, shows several corpses plus a few miserable creatures, half alive, vainly imploring Death to take them and end their suffering.

Portraiture also reflected the loss of optimism. Contemporary artists claimed that "art has grown and continues to grow worse day by day." While many people in most ages bemoan contemporary art, even the masters of the postplague period agreed with the lament. It was not a decline in skills or execution, however, but the evolution of a new style. The rendering of religious themes, the principal form of artistic exposition in the fourteenth century both before and after the Black Death, shows this. Perhaps the most impressive Florentine painting of the postplague era is Orcagni's altarpiece in the Strozzi Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, done from 1354 to 1357. Parts of it show the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. Their majesty and authority

are emphasized, as in preplague paintings, but there is also distance and sternness between mother and child. In some scenes, the Madonna is depicted as a corpse consumed by snakes and toads, a motif unprecedented in Tuscan art history. Christ is swaddled and bound, and the characters seem repressed and unsympathetic, quite unlike the New Testament portrayals so common before the plague.

Another change was the place of prominence given to the Trinity. There were comparatively few Trinity scenes painted in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and those which were done were usually placed against lavish, highly individualistic backgrounds, varying with the artist or patron. After the Black Death, such artistic distinctions were replaced by impersonal, uniform figures, the divine counterparts of the betrodden *Ciampi* workers who would rise in revolt against the oligarchs of Florence in 1378. There was a new emphasis on the supernatural, a change also evident in paintings of the Resurrection. Artists seemed to be motivated by the desire to endow Christ with more decisive, hierarchical superiority, and they stressed His miraculous and supernatural character.

In essence, the gay, light, individualistic themes begun in the thirteenth century by Giotto and his followers were replaced by the new conservatism and moralizing tone brought about by the Black Death. People worried about how material gains would affect their chances for salvation. In his "St. John the Evangelist," Del Biondo shows John trampling Avarice, Pride, and Vainglory, a message straightforward and obvious in its meaning. Plague and death were the new, popular themes for bourgeois, and even some aristocratic, patrons of art.

There were also changes in Northern art. The disasters of the fourteenth century did not cause a lessening of creativity, but rather, a change in direction. The old patrons of the preplague era were generally great churchmen, especially bishops and abbots. The new patrons, mostly members of the bourgeoisie, were less learned and sophisticated, and had more somber tastes. The art they sponsored no longer showed the harmony between man, reason, and nature—the forms of God placed in their proper, natural hierarchy and popularized in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Rather, the new art was narrative: it told stories, sometimes of God, but more frequently of secular things. Themes of earthly escapism were common. For better or worse, as bourgeois patrons became more important, artists were no longer auxiliaries of priests.

As in the fine arts, the Black Death brought changes in literary styles and ideas, most of which were somber.¹⁰ A good example is the

later works of Boccaccio. *The Decameron*, his literary masterpiece, was written in the vernacular and was enormously popular. Its cynicism reflected a common perception during and immediately after the Black Death. But his attitudes soon changed. While *The Decameron* is guilt-free, Boccaccio's later works show a more sober side. *The Corbaccio*, written in 1354–55, is gloomy, pessimistic, truculent, and ascetic, attitudes that hardened even more as Boccaccio grew older and began to think about his own salvation. In a 1373 letter, he condemned his earlier masterpiece:

I am certainly not pleased that you have allowed the illustrious women in your house to read my trifles; indeed, I beg you to give me your word that you will not permit it. You know how much in them is less than decent and opposed to modesty, how much stimulation to wanton lust, how many things that drive to lust even those most fortified against it. . . . My feminine readers will judge me a filthy pimp and an incestuous old man, shameless, foul-mouthed and malignant, eager to spread tales of the dissolution of others.¹¹

Boccaccio turned against love, passion, and even women; indeed, he became something of a misogynist. Perhaps he was affected by his idol and master, Petrarch. Petrarch lost his beloved Laura and four other intimates to the plague, resigned himself to religion, and turned to introspection. In a letter to Boccaccio, probably from 1363, Petrarch wrote: "Of all my friends, only you remain."

Plague brought similar changes to the literature of northern Europe. The brevity of life, the folly of exuberance, and the painful horror of death by plague were emphasized along with the more hedonistic themes of Chaucer. The purveyors of gloom and doom stressed that death did have at least one thing to recommend it—it brought equality to all the social orders. Exegesis became popular, but commentators offered little solace from the Bible. The Old Testament was drawn on more heavily than before, and it was stressed that God afflicted his chosen people as well as his enemies with plague. The most heavily quoted book from the New Testament was Revelations, where plague was described as God's punishment for the sins of man; in all, man no longer seemed to be God's favorite creature. Generally, the works of Chaucer and Villon notwithstanding, themes of youth, exuberance, happiness, and joy were played down. The dance of death became a common literary motif. Mystery plays with religious themes also became common, and they usually told of human decay and the torments of hell. There was much written about the ages of life, mostly in the form of calendars, with analogies drawn to the sea-

sons of the year. In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the calendars emphasized spring and summer; in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, they turned to themes of autumn and winter.

There were similar changes in the conceptions and realities of social order.³² The trifunctional system of the eleventh and twelfth centuries began to come apart around 1250, but it was the Black Death, with its massive depopulation, that finally brought the old order down. The plight of the clergy has already been described. In their role as intermediaries with God, they failed to provide solace to plague victims, and the medical education system, built around them, failed to provide physical comfort. In a world in which performance of an appointed role was very important, many clerics no longer seemed to be doing their jobs.

The Black Death brought crisis to the nobility.³³ The loss of between a quarter and a half of the West's population ended Europe's subsistence crisis. Depopulation meant widespread mobility and fluidity for those not tied to the land. The value of agricultural products began to fall, and it stayed low relative to that of industrial goods until the sixteenth century; at the same time, depopulation made agricultural workers scarce and, thus, much more valuable. Wages rose rapidly. The English chronicler Henry Knighton observed the new relationship: "There were small prices for virtually everything. A man could have a horse, which was worth 40 shillings, for 6 shillings, 8 pence, a cow for 12 pence. . . . Sheep and cattle went wandering over fields and through crops, and there was no one to drive or gather them together."³⁴

At Cuxham Manor in England, a ploughman who was paid 2 shillings a week in 1347 received 7 shillings in 1349, and 10 shillings, 6 pence, by 1350.³⁵ The result was a dramatic rise in standards of living for those in the lower part of the third order. William Langland noted in *Piers Ploughman* that hunger was no longer the peasants' master, that many beggars now refused as handouts that old standby, bread made from beans, and insisted on white bread and milk.³⁶ Day laborers not only received higher wages, but asked for and got lunches of meat pies and golden ale. The economic and social ramifications of this new relationship between wages and prices were far-reaching. But the social consequences were great, too, and were felt immediately after the Black Death. For the peasants who farmed the land, depopulation, providing they survived the plague, was a great boon. Yet for those who held the land as lords—the aristocracy and the clergy—it was disastrous.

At first, the landed classes tried to reinstate the trifunctional order through legislation issued by the representative bodies that they controlled. Authorities all across Europe promptly began to enact sumptuary laws. In France, a 1349 Statute of Labor attempted to limit wages to pre-1348 levels. This failed, and two years later a new law was enacted which allowed for a 33% rise. In 1349, the King's Council in England passed an Ordinance of Labour, that froze wages. This was followed in 1351 by a Parliamentary Statute of Labourers that tried to do the same thing. Parliament, it should be remembered, consisted almost entirely of men from the first two orders, with a few great merchants from the third, most of whom owned property in their own right. In 1350, the archbishop of Canterbury, very much a member of the landholding elite, issued a document called *Effrenata cupiditas*, or unbridled cupidity. It was a general critique of greed, with particular barbs aimed at clerics who worked only for cash or charged extra fees for ordinary services. All of these efforts were for naught, and landlords discovered that the only way to keep laborers was to pay the going rate.

Sumptuary laws were passed to regulate fashions, particularly those of the third order.³⁷ Rising standards of living and Epicurean attitudes had produced new tastes in fashion, particularly in clothing. The increasingly colorful and extravagant dress was a curious contrast to the somber tones of literature, but much in keeping with the general contradictions of the Later Middle Ages. Men took to tight pantaloons and long, pointed shoes, and women wore hairpieces and dresses with plunging necklines, some almost to the point of baring their breasts. Furs, which always had been popular, were now affordable for more people than at any time in centuries. They were big business in the Late Middle Ages, and provided Northern furriers and skimmers with fine livings. Medieval authorities believed that furs ought to bear some relationship to the social status of the men and women who wore them and, in the fourteenth century, legislation was passed to ensure that this would remain the case.

In 1337, at the nadir of the subsistence crisis, the English Parliament had declared that only aristocrats and clerics with incomes of £1000 or more could wear furs; no one else was deemed worthy. Another law, from 1363, well illustrates the changes brought by the new standards of living. All people except the humblest manual workers were permitted to wear furs and were given a schedule of what they were allowed. Knights and ladies with incomes over £266 could wear optimum white and gray full furs from northern muscalids. Less

prosperous knights were allowed the facings of ermine and weasel, but only on their hoods and cloaks. Gentlemen worth £200 a year and merchants valued at £1000 a year could wear white muscalid furs on their hoods. Gentlemen worth less than £200, and clerks, other merchants, and craftsmen valued at £500 a year wore lambskin, while all others valued at more than 40 shillings could affect sheep, rabbit, cat, or fox. This legislation failed, of course; if it had any effect at all, it was as a spur to the socially ambitious. Everyone wore whatever they could manage, social rank to the contrary. Such high standards—workmen wearing furs—would end by the early sixteenth century. But, by that time, the old trifunctional system had undergone dramatic changes.

The position of the nobility was affected by the Black Death in other ways. Plague did not honor social class, and mortality among the nobility approximated that of the general population. Since inheritance was more important to them than it was to the peasants, the biological crisis was more severe. This made an already bad situation worse. Given the high infant and child mortality rates of the Middle Ages—combined, they probably killed three of four children before age ten—and maternal mortality of about 20%, it was hard in the best of circumstances to produce an heir. In England, 75% of all noble families failed to produce a male heir through two generations.⁴⁰ This meant continual flux among the aristocracy as old families died out and new ones replaced them.

One response to this tremendous fluidity was a renewed emphasis by the older families on the importance of knightly ritual. In the Early and, to a slightly lesser extent, the High Middle Ages, the aristocracy had been warriors. In the Late Middle Ages, while they were still soldiers, their military ascendancy was being challenged by infantry men using new weapons. Consequently, late medieval aristocrats became more conscious than ever of their role as heavy cavalry, turned with disdain upon the baseborn footmen who as often as not defeated them on the battlefield, and immersed themselves in elaborate rituals of chivalry. Armor became plated rather than chain-linked. Tournaments, formerly held for practice and profit and usually conducted with the actual weapons of war, became dress celebrations, with combatants using blunted swords and lances. Great knightly orders such as the Garter and the Golden Fleece were established by kings and magnates, and ritual battles such as the Combat of the Twenty, which occurred during the Hundred Years' War, were held.⁴¹ However obsolete they might become, such events

helped the old aristocracy preserve their identity. A similar, albeit somewhat gentler, retreat for the lords was to manners and courtesy. Dozens of books were compiled on nurture and grace, and how to dress, act, eat, and think like a gentleman. The nobility were developing a contempt for manual labor and laborers, and even for merchants and the most profitable commercial activities.

High mortality among the aristocracy, then, was more damaging than it was among the peasantry because of the importance to the lords of proper patterns of inheritance. At the same time, there was a new balance between prices and wages. Land was no longer as valuable as it had been, but laborers were worth much more than before. Society was changing from a labor-intensive base to a land-intensive one, and markets for foodstuffs collapsed as population decreased. As more tenants died, lords had to hire wage laborers to farm their lands, and these workers demanded better pay and conditions. On the manors of the Clare estates in England, for example, reaping wages per quarter averaged less than five pence per acre between 1340 and 1349.⁴² In 1349, wages doubled. Estate auditors did their best to reduce their labor costs, sometimes by arbitrarily slicing them in half. But, generally, such efforts were ineffective. Drawing an example from England again, aristocratic incomes fell over 20% between 1347 and 1353.

One of the most important effects of the Black Death was its role in the provocation of popular rebellion.⁴³ Plague alone did not cause the many rebellions of the fourteenth century; rather, they had a long and complex history. But until the late thirteenth century, rebellions in Europe were comparatively few and generally of religious inspiration. Beginning with the Sicilian Vespers in 1282 and several revolts in the Netherlands and rural France, this changed. These later uprisings first took on political overtones and then, exacerbated by the depopulation of the Black Death, became increasingly socioeconomic in nature.

The revolts after the Black Death had several common characteristics. First, they took place during a general breakdown in law and order.⁴⁴ Both the court and police systems in most of fourteenth century Europe were operated by local landholders. King and church might claim a superior jurisdiction, but, with the exception of parts of England and Italy, law enforcement was a local prerogative. As the economic and military power and social prestige of the landholders declined, their ability to uphold the law also diminished. Coupled with the increasing tendency toward violence, this resulted in an enor-

mous upswing in crime. In England, where royal power was probably more extensive than elsewhere in Europe, the incidence of homicide from 1349 to 1369 was about twice that of the period 1320 to 1340, despite the general drop in population. As the fabric and structure of society deteriorated, people resorted increasingly to violence to settle their differences.

A second plague-related reason for the spate of revolts was a heightened sense of class or identity. This was especially so among the peasantry, on whose labor and produce the other classes depended. It was not so much that postplague peasants had, in Marxian terms, a positive sense of their economic value. Rather, they believed that their interests conflicted with those of the first two orders, the clergy and the nobility. This sense, perhaps first evident in the early fourteenth century as the effects of successive famines began to cripple the manorial system, was made even more apparent after the Black Death when the lords refused to recognize the peasants' changed situation.

The new relationship between wages and prices was a third reason. Boccaccio claimed that prices shot up during the Black Death. He was right, but by 1351 things had changed. Prices for industrial goods remained high, a reflection of increased demand and a shortage of skilled laborers to make special products. But population was reduced so much that, as soon as seeds were sown and crops harvested, the great subsistence crisis ended. It took another year or two for distribution systems to return to normal; then food prices began to fall. Because of the population decline, wages went up, and so did standards of living. The Late Middle Ages has with good reason been called the "Golden Age of Laborers," and many scholars believe that real wages were higher in the fifteenth century than at any time in history until the twentieth century. As discussed, members of the first two orders chafed at the rising wage level and tried to reverse this trend through legislation. To members of the third order, this was the cruelest blow of all. Having at last attained some economic security in a market economy, they were now being asked to live within new, artificial restraints.

Three major revolts resulted from postplague social and economic tensions. Two—the *Jacquerie* in France and the Peasants' Revolt in England—were peasant uprisings, and the other—that of the *Ciompi* in Florence—was an urban-industrial rebellion. The *Jacquerie* took place in 1358. It was the result of a number of things besides the Black Death. The king of France, Jean II (1350–64), had been

taken prisoner by the English at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. France was leaderless, and no one was quite sure how to fill the gap. Many members of the third order believed that the clerics and aristocrats who competed with the king for power were not making a serious effort to secure Jean's return. A curious phenomenon of the postplague revolts was the enthusiasm the rebels displayed for their king, no matter how inept he might be. The rebels believed that evil influence, rather than a malevolent monarch, was responsible for bad government. There were also the depredations of the *routiers*, or Free Companies, groups of mercenaries who, between battles of the Hundred Years' War, lived off the produce of the peasantry. And there was an *agent provocateur* of sorts, Charles of Navarre, who wished to be king of France himself and played the French off against the English, as it was in his interest to perpetuate the chaos of the postplague period.

The class tensions exacerbated by the Black Death were also crucial to the outbreak of the *Jacquerie*. The soldiers of the uprising were mainly peasants, but many of the leaders, including the spokesman, Etienne Marcel, were bourgeois. The bourgeoisie wanted political power commensurate with their economic gains. The landed classes, who were so besieged socially and economically that a contemporary claimed that "knights and brigands had become interchangeable," were reluctant to relinquish their political privileges. Members of the first two orders, particularly the *bellatores*, held members of the third order, particularly the peasants, in utter contempt. The very term "*Jacques*," from which the expression *Jacquerie* was taken, was a derisive reference to the leather jerkins peasants wore in battle in place of armor, which they could not afford. A noble proverb went: "Smite a villein and he will bless you; bless a villein and he will smite you." From *Le Despit au Villain* comes an extraordinary passage:

Tell me Lord, if you please, by what right or title does a villein eat beef? . . . And this troubles God. God suffers from it and I too. For they are a sorry lot, those villeins who eat fat goose! Should they eat fish? Rather, let them eat thistles and briars, thorns and straws and hay on Sundays and pea pods on weekdays. They should keep watch without sleep and have trouble always; that is how villeins should live. Yet each day they are full and drunk on the best wines, and in fine clothes. The great expenditures of villeins come at a high cost, for it is this that destroys and ruins the world. It is they who spoil the common welfare. From the vil-

lein comes all unhappiness. Should they eat meat? Rather, they should chew grass on the heath with the horned cattle and go naked on all fours."¹

Such attitudes, embedded in aristocratic literature since the twelfth century, became even more emphatic as plague brought new economic conditions.

The peasants returned the feeling and, during the *Jacquerie*, put their feelings into action. The revolt lasted only a few weeks, but it was one of the bitterest and bloodiest in French history. Most of the action centered around the great estates of the Loire and Seine Valleys, the heart of the kingdom. The chronicler Froissart, supported by, and a supporter of, the aristocracy, wrote of the fury of the peasantry. He claimed that the *Jacquerie* began when

certain people of the common villages without any head or ruler, assembled together in the Beauvoisin. In the beginning, they passed not a hundred. . . . They gathered together without any council, and without armor, saving with staves and knives, and so went to the house of a knight dwelling thereby, and broke up his house and slew the knight and the lady and all his children, great and small, and burned the house. And then they went to another castle, and took the knight thereof and tied him fast to a stake, and raped his wife and his daughter before his face, and then killed the lady and his daughter and all his other children, and then slew the knight by great torment, and burnt and tore down the castle. And so they did to diverse other castles and good houses; and they multiplied until they were a thousand. . . . These mischievous people thus assembled without captain or armor, robbed, burnt and slew all the gentlemen that they could lay hands on, and forced and ravished ladies and damsels and did such shameful deeds that no human creature ought to think on such, and he that did the most mischief was most praised with them and the greatest master. I dare not write the horrible deeds that they did to ladies and damsels; among others, they slew a knight and [then] put him on a spit and roasted him at the fire in sight of the lady, his wife and children, and after that the lady was forced and raped by ten or twelve of them, and then they made her eat of her husband, and after made her die an evil death with all her children."

The peasants' successes were short-lived. Etienne Marcel, the Parisian draper who led the revolt, lost control of, and was killed by, a mob of rebels. Perforce, those Parisian merchants who had supported the peasants became afraid and abandoned the revolt. Charles of Navarre, always looking for personal advantages, raised troops to

fight the peasants. The aristocrats regained their lost courage and set upon the peasants, who were put down with much savagery and carnage; thus ended the *Jacquerie*. But the resentment and the social tensions lingered on.

The *Ciampi* were workers in the Florentine textile industries. Prices for finished goods, especially deluxe textiles such as those made by the Florentines, remained high in the generation after the Black Death and, though wages were up, the industrialists made a great deal of money. But all was not well. The same political and social tensions that characterized the relations between lords and peasants in France, and that were dramatically exacerbated by the Black Death, held between employers and workers in Florence. Florentine writers proclaimed that their city was a democracy, with power divided among 21 guilds. But, in fact, the division was unequal, with the principal power resting in seven guilds that were controlled by an elite of bankers and long-distance traders. Further, the *Ciampi* workers had genuine financial complaints. While the great merchants generally dealt in florins, one of Europe's most stable currencies, the workers were paid their salaries in pennies. The value of the florin was kept steady by the ruling elite, but when the textile industry slumped briefly in the early 1370s, the penny was debased. In 1349, 240 pennies made 1 florin; by 1378, a florin was worth over 1000 pennies. The lords never suffered during the crisis, but the workers saw their standards of living crumbling. Florence was not unique.² Workers in other north and central Italian cities suffered from similar debasements and all had before them the example of the revolt of the lowborn in Rome, from 1347 to 1351, led by Cola di Rienzi. But it was in Florence that the mass violence and urban disorder so characteristic of the second half of the fourteenth century erupted.

The *Ciampi* revolt began in summer 1378, when many workers were laid off. During the most violent spell, in late July, the palaces and townhouses of the rich were looted, gutted, and burned. For almost five years, the workers were able to share in the government of the city. They demanded the right to form guilds of their own, tax reform, the abolition of financial privileges, and a moratorium on debts. By 1383, the textile crisis was over and much of the value of the pennies had been restored; the merchant elite managed to regain power, and the *Ciampi* were disenfranchised once again. But, unlike the *Jacques* of France, at least in economic terms, their lot had improved, and their wages would remain relatively stable into the fifteenth century.

The English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is the best known of the postplague uprisings. The immediate cause of the revolt was a series of poll, or head, taxes assessed three times between 1377 and 1381. As with the *Jacquerie* and the *Ciampi*, most of the conditions that set off the English revolt had been festering before 1347, but plague accelerated the changes and general social tensions. The peasants wanted to preserve the high wages and new mobility brought by depopulation, and the lords, threatened on all fronts, wished to maintain the status quo despite the new economic conditions.

The revolt erupted in eastern England, the richest part of the kingdom, rather than in the depressed northern and western counties. It began when a number of peasants in Essex refused to pay the head tax and drove the collectors from their village. Spontaneously, peasants and townsmen rose against what they perceived to be injustices. The thrust of the rebellion, which was led by a wealthy peasant named Wat Tyler and an unemployed priest named John Ball, was antinoble, anticlerical, and antiauthoritarian. Tyler, leading a peasant army on London, exhorted his followers to "kill all lawyers and servants of the king." According to Froissart, Ball claimed: "Ah, ye good people, the matter goes not well to pass in England, nor shall not do so till everything be common, and that we may be all united together and that the lords be no greater masters than we be. What have we deserved or why should we be thus kept in serfdom; we be all come from one father and one mother, Adam and Eve." "From this came the famous jingle:

When Adam dived and Eve spanned
Who was then a gentleman?

The English Peasants' Revolt followed the patterns of the *Jacquerie*, the *Ciampi*, and other postplague revolts. After an early period of success, bloody revenge on their tormentors, and random violence—among other things, the archbishop of Canterbury was beheaded and most of the brothels in greater London were destroyed—the aristocracy and gentry regained their dominance and, as in France, brutally put down the rebels. But, in England, as on the Continent, the rebels came away with substantial gains. Poll taxes were eliminated and there were no more effective ordinances fixing wages or limiting mobility. The peasants benefited from high wages and, by 1400, the old bonds of villeinage had loosened or crumbled. There were no more peasant revolts in England in the Late Middle Ages because the peasants had no reason to revolt.

Both the urban and the rural disorders reflected the sharp class conflicts that developed after the Black Death. A general social discontent arose, not so much over conditions in postplague Europe as over the ruling classes' attempts to deny the lower order the better fortune depopulation brought. The breakdown of the old trifunctional system and the increasing violence made revolt easier and more palatable. The revolts were spontaneous and poorly organized and, in time, were easily put down. Perhaps their most telling legacy was the end of the traditional hierarchical social structure, which was replaced by interclass bitterness and tension. How might the changes affecting the generation which survived the Black Death be characterized? First, immediate depopulation of at least a third ended, in a single blow, Europe's subsistence crisis. By the early 1340s, most Europeans were getting poorer. They held and farmed less land, produced and, hence, consumed less food, and had a smaller say in determining their future than at any time since the Dark Ages. By contrast, the landlord class was becoming increasingly powerful. Europe was evolving, as were parts of Asia and Africa, into an impoverished "agrocentric" society. By 1350, this process was dramatically reversed. High wages and low prices were ruining the lords, while members of the third order were embarking on 150 years of comparative prosperity. But in the short term, for those who survived the first plague, the psychological effects of the Black Death were far more important. People were traumatized. They lost faith in their own abilities, in the old values, and if not in God then in the traditional ways in which He had been propitiated. Europe was plunged into a moral crisis. The old order was collapsing and the new one was not yet in place.