

In the Wake of Death:
Socioeconomic Effects of the Black Death in Medieval England

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Of all the pandemic diseases that have spread through the world, the Black Death is perhaps the most infamous. The plague swept through Europe in the fourteenth century leaving a long line of destruction in its wake. While most people know of the plague's effects in countries such as Italy and France courtesy of eyewitness accounts provided by such people as Boccaccio from Florence, some areas affected by the plague are swept aside. Recent historians have begun to research these areas which include the Scandinavian countries and the Ottoman empire, but England remains a largely unstudied location. Despite this lack of study, England experienced rather unique and transformative effects of the Black Death. Unlike most other European states, England was experiencing overpopulation and the crumbling of its traditional socioeconomic system when the plague arrived. Following the mass depopulation that accompanied the plague, England was in a better position to recover and evolve than most other European countries. Lower classes, the workforce of the state, seemed to benefit both economically and socially where elsewhere they struggled to survive. The Church began to lose its hold on power in England though it strengthened in other states. Finally, the nobility suffered more than any other social group, and struggled to maintain their power in the face of the lower classes' ascension. In the years following the plague, as peasants and merchants gained more economic freedom, tensions grew between lower and upper classes of society as the upper classes stood to lose their status and way of life. Nobles took drastic steps to regain and hold onto their power, ultimately leading to the Peasant's Revolt in 1381. Although the nobility managed to defeat the peasant forces, a major change occurred in the ideas of social and economic structure. Due to the Black Death, the lower classes of English society gained a new level of respect and importance in the eyes of the nobility that would shape the state's growth and development into the twenty-first century.

Prior to the arrival of the plague, England was on the cusp of change. Feudalism, the traditional socioeconomic system of England that had been in place for hundreds of years, was all but gone by the time of the Black Death. In this old system, power was divided between the king, lords, and vassals (lesser lords). Peasants, on the other hand, were primarily serfs tied to the land they worked for their lords by debt. As such, the feudal system solidified an English mindset that viewed the nobility as respectable and capable of the social and economic power they held, while it viewed peasants simply as a labor source that was not capable of holding power and needed noble protection to survive. However, by the mid fourteenth century, England was outgrowing the remnants of the feudal system¹ as Stuart Borsch describes in *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study*. Borsch notes that England was facing overpopulation in relation to its agrarian output through manorialism.² Ole Benedictow describes the results of overpopulation further in *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History*:

The population pressure on resources for agricultural production tended to force the population to give up self-sufficiency on economic production in favor of economic specialization in order to produce as efficiently as possible. Instead, they would acquire needed products by barter or sale and purchase that had likewise been produced efficiently and at competitive prices by specialized producers elsewhere. In short, from the end of the thirteenth century until the advent of the Black Death a substantial economic modernization of the English economy would have taken place with a considerably increased emphasis on a market economy.³

Borsch claims that because of the previously stated conditions along with expanded markets and trade, standardized laws, and the increased use of coinage, the lower classes came to be better

¹ Stuart J. Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 59.

² Borsch, 58.

³ Ole Jorgen Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 135.

acquainted with the nuances of the economy.⁴ These skills would prove invaluable in the years following the plague, allowing peasants to maneuver their way into relatively higher economic status.

The arrival of the plague in England marked a significant change in English life. According to Benedictow, who spends half of his book analyzing the spread of the Black Death throughout Europe with an entire chapter dedicated to the British Isles, the plague first appeared in the port town of Melcombe, present day Weymouth, sometime in the summer of 1348 between June 21 and August 1.⁵ From there, Benedictow traces the plague as it spread both east and west across the coast and made its way slowly inward by land.⁶ Despite its relatively slow spread, the Black Death had conquered the entirety of England by the second half of 1349.⁷ Aside from following the spread of the Black Death, Benedictow also focused a chapter of his book on the mortality rate of the plague in England. After a detailed examination of the average mortality rates of different social classes, Benedictow estimates that the general mortality was approximately 62.5%.⁸ Such rapid and rampant depopulation served as a catalyst that brought about a series of changes in the English society, economy, and political framework.

Due to depopulation following the Black Death, England faced a massive labor shortage, which placed peasants in a unique position to benefit economically and socially. According to Borsch, “peasants were willing and able to abandon estates if rent or wage conditions were not to their advantage.”⁹ As a result, peasants gained a level of economic mobility they had not known

⁴ Borsch, 57.

⁵ Benedictow, 126.

⁶ Benedictow, 130-131.

⁷ Benedictow, 142.

⁸ Benedictow, 377.

⁹ Borsch, 60.

before and forced landowners to compete for labor. Further, Borsch states that the economic opportunities that opened for the lower classes of society “created a cycle of positive feedback.”¹⁰ In other words, since peasants were able to increase their economic capacity, they could enter the market place and further stimulate the economy.¹¹ While the Black Death favored peasants economically, this same favor caused animosity to grow between peasants and landowners. Landed nobles had suffered severe economic losses because of the plague¹² and would continue to fight through the following years to regain their power.

Peasants were not the only group in English society to benefit from the Black Death. In the short term, crafters and merchants also experienced new economic opportunities. Archaeologist Barney Sloane describes the economic flourishing of guilds and the opportunities they provided in detail. According to Sloane, most guilds experienced great losses within their ranks following the plague, and were in desperate need of new members.¹³ Competition between guilds granted many individuals the opportunity to learn a craft and become an invaluable part of the local economy where before they had experienced little social or economic mobility.¹⁴ Those of the lower classes in London, and other English cities, benefited most from such an arrangement. As producers of goods, they had a higher spending ability and were able to afford a higher standard of living, thus contributing back to the economy. As such, many were quick to take up guild apprenticeships when they were available, and softened the economic decline of

¹⁰ Borsch, 64.

¹¹ Borsch, 64.

¹² Borsch, 62.

¹³ Barney Sloane, *The Black Death in London* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011), 44.

¹⁴ Sloane, 57.

guilds after the plague.¹⁵ Overall, guilds and those of the lower classes both shared the benefits of a depopulated England.

While the lower ranks of society received relatively positive outcomes from the plague, higher society experienced the opposite. For example, the English clergy fared poorly in terms of social and political status following the plague. In many cases, according to Benedictow, priests were the first subjected to the plague because they frequented the households of plague victims when administering last rites.¹⁶ Although among the first in the community to become infected, the mortality of the clergy averaged lower than the general mortality rate at 44%.¹⁷ This may be due in part to a number of priests who abandoned their posts as the plague worsened,¹⁸ as described in several examples in John Kelly's book *The Great Morality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. Coupled with the devastation people faced in the wake of the plague, they began to lose faith in their clergy and in the Church itself. The general discontent growing toward the Church was fueled further by attitude of the clergy in the aftermath of the Black Death. According to Sloane, many of the clergy began to charge high prices for their services, and others were "exchanging their current livings for better paid ones."¹⁹ People saw such instances as an affront to their faith and began to deem clergy as untrustworthy. As such, the Church lost much of its secular authority in England.

The group that perhaps lost the most in the aftermath of the Black Death was the nobility. The landed gentry in particular faced great economic hardship, which Borsch attributes to the

¹⁵ Sloane, 158.

¹⁶ Benedictow, 124.

¹⁷ Benedictow, 360.

¹⁸ John Kelly, *The Great Morality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 194.

¹⁹ Sloane, 115.

following factors: “They lost income from falling grain prices; they paid out more cash to hired labor; they received less cash from customary and leasehold rents; and they had to pay more for manufactures.”²⁰ Borsch goes on to describe the landowners’ view of the plague’s effects as “a catastrophic agrarian depression”, stating that they encountered a 25% to 50% drop in income for almost one hundred years following the Black Death.²¹ As the nobility saw their fortunes dwindle, they became even more intent on curbing peasants’ socioeconomic ascent, in fear of losing their positions and lifestyles. In addition to nobles, the royal administration also suffered from the Black Death. With each wave of the plague, experienced officials died and were replaced with younger men who were unsure of their decisions, often creating strife within the governing body.²² England’s foreign relations often worsened these matters of conflict. For example, England experienced a large shift in its economic activities with its Irish colonies after the plague. Due to the lack of labor in England, the crown came to rely upon Irish resources and was forced to further integrate their colonies into the political system.²³ This weakened the administration’s power even more, and further disrupted the way of life of which the English nobility was accustomed.

Despite the heavy tolls of depopulation and a shifting socioeconomic system, King Edward III, who reigned from 1327-1377, worked to maintain as much stability in the kingdom as he was able. For example, Sloane mentions a rather unusual occurrence during the plague: though roughly half of London’s workforce were dead or in the process of dying, great construction projects such as the building of new roads and bridges, as well as relatively normal

²⁰ Borsch, 62.

²¹ Borsch, 62.

²² Sloane, 157.

²³ Brendan Smith, *Crisis and Survival in Late Medieval Ireland: The English of Louth and their Neighbours, 1330-1450* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41.

trade continued as they had before the plague arrived.²⁴ Such activities appear to be an attempt by Edward III to stimulate the economy in the face of massive depopulation. Alternatively, they may have been an attempt to maintain some form of normality for the English people, who had seen most of their friends, family, or colleagues die in the plague. Edward III furthered his attempts after the plague by issuing decrees, such as the Statute of Labourers, which limited and froze wages and prices of goods. Set into law by Edward III and his parliament in 1351, the Statute of Labourers is one of the most widely known laws from the period following the Black Death. In the statute, Edward III attempts to regulate the economy in the presence of depopulation and peasants' newly discovered economic freedom. The statute begins by calling out "servants who were idle and unwilling to serve after the pestilence without taking the most outrageous payments."²⁵ In this line, one can sense the animosity between the upper classes and lower classes. As lower classes, gained economic mobility and benefits from the plague, the upper class landowners and "great men"²⁶ saw this rise as an affront to their power. In an attempt to remedy this affront, the statute declared that all laborers had to accept the wages and prices for their services and goods that had been in place during the twentieth year of Edward III's reign (1347, a year before the arrival of the plague) or face imprisonment.²⁷ These conditions and threats were rarely enforced, and only succeeded in feeding peasants' dislike for the upper classes. This cycle of enmity would continue as the government of England passed further ordinances and taxes, culminating in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

²⁴ Sloane, 50.

²⁵ Chris Given-Wilson, ed., *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England 1275-1504 Vol. V* (London: National Archives, 2005), 28.

²⁶ Given-Wilson, 29.

²⁷ Given-Wilson, 28.

The lack of labor brought on by the Black Death is evidenced in many ordinances in the years following its destruction. Aside from the royally decreed Statute of Labourers, individual towns also implemented wage restrictions on their citizens, particularly servants working for guilds. The Ordinance of the Cobblers of Bristol in 1364, for example, sets several rules upon the cobblers' guild, restricting the wages and number of servants they could have because of "the excessive price of their servants of the aforesaid craft [cobbling] who are loath to apply themselves to the craft unless they have too outrageous and excessive salary."²⁸ This phrase is remarkably similar to the opening sentence of the Statute of Labourers and once again demonstrated the upper class' unease of peasants' socioeconomic ascent in the wake of the plague. The ordinance goes on to state a number of restrictions: "no master . . . [shall] pay any servant for sewing and yarking shoes . . . any more than 6*d* [pence] per dozen"; "every master . . . shall keep one servant called a 'covenant-hire' and no more"; and "no master may employ any other servant within the tern agreed upon them, nor another servant taken away or procured from another's service."²⁹ All such offences would receive the following punishment: "he shall pay . . . to the use of the commonality of Bristol, 6*s* [shillings] 8*d*, and to the contribution of the said craft [cobbling] 40*d*, without any pardon."³⁰ The ordinance differs from the Statute of Labourers here, requiring a monetary punishment rather than imprisonment. Such regulations would have served as a more powerful obstruction to the economic growth of those in lower classes. It insured that servants for the craft would maintain a set (low) income, and that masters who disobeyed would lose any collected wealth, and thus halt their economic ascension. In addition to

²⁸ "Ordinances for Crafts at Bristol," in *Towns in Medieval England: Selected Sources*, ed. Gervase Rosser (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 87.

²⁹ "Ordinances for Crafts at Bristol," 87.

³⁰ "Ordinances for Crafts at Bristol," 87.

statewide laws like the Statute of Labourers, town laws regulating wages added further to the economic and social oppression upper classes inflicted upon lower classes.

Tensions continued to grow between classes in the reign of Edward III's successor, Richard II. The poem *Tax Has Tenet Us Alle*, authored by an anonymous poet, provides a narrative of the Peasants' Revolt. Following statutes and ordinances, which restricted wages, a poll tax passed in 1381 ignited the tension that had been growing between peasants and nobility since the Black Death. The poet describes the tax and subsequent revolt using the words "Tax has tenet (ruined) us alle."³¹ He then chronicles the major events of the revolt, stating that it began in Kent where a mob formed and began looting the nobility.³² From there the peasants made their way toward London, "emptying estates as they [went] (*sunt predia depopulantes*)."³³ After detailing some of the rebels' actions in London, the poet ends the tale by painting Richard II as a brave hero, who fought and defeated the rebels at Smithfield when other nobility cowered in fear.³⁴ The poet includes several lines like this throughout the poem, extolling the king, which leads one to assume that the crown commissioned the poet. For example, the poet explicitly blames the rebels, along with greedy officials, for causing the rebellion. He even states that "The kyng therof hade smalle," return from the taxes that started the conflict, instead claiming that officials took the money for themselves.³⁵ This poem indicates the opinions of the royal administration following the rebellion. While the nobility placed a large amount of blame on peasants for starting the conflict, they also began to incriminate others within their ranks. Such thinking perhaps led to a shift in social perception among the upper classes, away from the

³¹ "Richard II's Reign and the Peasants' Revolt," in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), 147.

³² "Richard II's Reign and the Peasants' Revolt," 147.

³³ "Richard II's Reign and the Peasants' Revolt," 147.

³⁴ "Richard II's Reign and the Peasants' Revolt," 149.

³⁵ "Richard II's Reign and the Peasants' Revolt," 147.

traditional highly stratified social system and toward a system that respected the importance of all of its classes.

Sources dating from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century indicate the changing political view following the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, and the elites' attempts to reestablish their dominance. In the poem, "The Descryvyng of Mannes Membres", the "correct" hierarchy of society is described by an unknown author. The lines: "The heued, I likne to a kyng, / For he is lord souereyn of al,"³⁶ firmly denote the authority of the king over his people. Below the king in power are government officials, whom the poet "lykne[s] [to] the nekke, moche of mygyt, / That body and heued to-gydre knyht."³⁷ Such wording indicates that government officials should enforce the king's will among the lower classes. However, the wording also seems to allow for the interpretation that the duty of an official is to both the king and the general populace. While placed in a traditionally higher position (the neck), a government official is still expected to act as the intermediary between the king and the people.

The next social class is described in the following lines: "Now I lykne mannys brest, / To presthod in good degree, / Most in perile, lest in rest, / For besynesse in spiritualite."³⁸ As for most of England's history, the clergy holds a high class in society. However, the poet appears to mock priests to an extent, such as in the lines: "In penaunce and in preyer prest; / Meke of spirit in pouerte."³⁹ The poet suggests that while priests hold high positions, they are so consumed in their own role, that they neglect the role they should play in society. This may signify a turning

³⁶ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," in *Sources for the History of Medicine in Late Medieval England*, ed. Carole Rawcliffe (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1995), 32.

³⁷ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," 32.

³⁸ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," 33.

³⁹ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," 33.

point in the popular view of the Church, indicating many people's growing lack of faith in the Church after the Black Death, when no amount of prayer and supplication seemed to help them, and when their clergy abandoned them.

The next few stanzas continue down the body, describing the place of lords, knights, lawmen, and merchants. By the time the poet reaches the lower legs, he has reached the role of the lower classes in society. "Mannys leggis, likne y may / To all craftes that worche with handes," denotes craftsmen or guild members and "The feet, to lykne, y wole assay, / To all trewe tylyers of lands."⁴⁰ By comparing craftsmen and laborers to the legs and feet, the poet seems to denote that they are of the lowest parts of society. However, one can draw the conclusion that despite their low class, these groups are vital to the social and economic structure of the kingdom. After all, a man cannot run properly without legs or feet, and neither can a kingdom without craftsmen and laborers. The poet fortifies this idea of reliance upon the lower classes in the final stanza:

I likne a kingdom in good astate,
 To stalworthe man, myghty in hele.
 While non of his lymes other hate,
 He is myghty, with a-nother to dele.
 Yif eche of his lymes with other debate,
 He waxeth syk, for flesch is frele.
 His enemys wayte erly and late,
 In his febleness, on hym to stele.⁴¹

⁴⁰ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," 34.

⁴¹ "The Body as a Metaphor for Society," 34.

Despite the poet's use of the body to emphasize the social and political hierarchy of England following the Peasants' Revolt, some ideas that began developing after the Black Death are still included in the final stanza. The poet includes the thought that every part of society is essential to keep the kingdom running, and they should be treated with a certain amount of respect in the eyes of the law and society.

This trend is evidenced further in a subgenre of poetry, "plowman writings," that was popular in the late fourteenth century. Such works generally glorified farmers and laborers, reflecting the new image of respect for lower classes following the Peasants' Revolt. A famous example of this writing style is located within Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. One of the pilgrims introduced in the prologue is the Plowman. Chaucer describes him in the following lines:

A trewe swynkere (worker) and a good was he,
 Lyvyng in pees (peace) and parfit charitee.
 God loved he best with al his hoole herte
 At alle tymes, thogh hym gamed or smerte (whether in joy or distress),
 An thanne his neighebore right as hymselfe.
 He would tresshe, and thereto dyke and delve (make ditches and dig),
 For Cristes sake, for every povre wight (poor person),
 Withouten hyre (payment), if it lay in his myght.
 His tythes payde he ful fair and wel,⁴²

⁴² "Plowman Writings," in *Medieval English Political Writings*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 1996), 258.

Through these few succinct lines, Chaucer captures the idealized view of the working class in the late fourteenth century, and supports the shift in favor of a more respectful opinion toward peasants.

From the day that the Black Death entered England, it would set into motion a chain of events that would irrevocably change the social, economic, and political structures of the kingdom. Depopulation was the major catalyst that brought about these changes. In the short term, the lower classes of society benefited by experiencing unprecedented economic and social mobility, while higher classes faced the brunt of the negative consequences of the plague. From a long-term perspective, however, the effects of the plague prove more complex. The growing tensions between peasants and the upper class only escalated in the years following the Black Death. Due to the peasants' increase in socioeconomic power, the upper classes struggled to regain what they had lost. They tried to accomplish this first through acts of law such as the Statute of Labourers, and then through a series of increased taxes which ultimately led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Following the defeat of the peasant forces, the government once again tried to reestablish complete control. However, the events of the past decades had introduced the idea that even the lower classes of society were essential to the working of the kingdom, and thus should be treated with respect. This new idea was a firm step away from the feudal ideals that had reigned throughout England for much of its history, and pointed England in a direction that had led the country through centuries to the present.

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