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The Black Death - Part III

Lead: Faced with the enormous loss of perhaps as much as a third of its population, Europe began to pick up the pieces in the wake of the Black Death.

Intro.: "A Moment in Time" with Dan Roberts

Content: With friends and family dying right and left Europeans in the fourteenth century were faced with grave social problems and a spiritual crisis as a result of the bubonic plague. They did not know what was consuming them. This ignorance

provoked great acts of courage and compassion particularly among the clergy, but also near barbaric brutality. Many people fell back on that tired but convenient medieval explanation for the unknown: they blamed the Jews specifically for poisoning the drinking water. In the face of such a profound threat to life, Christian civility went out the window and thousands of Jews were murdered. According to one source, 16,000 killed in Strasbourg alone in 1649.

In view of the intense human suffering resulting from the plague and the painful deaths of many millions it is surprising that on balance the consequences of the Black Death are not as severe as one would

imagine. Before the disease struck Europe was overpopulated. Low yields from overplanted fields, bad weather, and diseased livestock led to a poor harvests and a population weakened by a struggle with famine, a population ripe for reaping.

With the coming of the Black Death, the number of mouths to feed was reduced. Greater productivity led to prosperity for those who were left. Wages rose and efforts to keep them down such as the English Statute of Laborers which attempted in 1351 to roll back wages to pre-plague levels failed.

Perhaps the worst consequence was the spiritual crisis provoked by a

faceless curse about which nothing could be done. In a way not unlike the reaction of many to those infected by the AIDS virus in our own day, families and friends would flee the foul smelling and doomed victims and leave them to die a painful death all alone. Eventually, the Black Death receded but it would be years before Europe recovered its pre-plague population level and spiritual confidence.

"A Moment in Time" is produced at the University of Richmond. This is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Gottfried, Robert Steven. *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*. New York, NY: Collier/Macmillan, 1983.

Smith, Geddes. *Plague On Us*. New York, NY: Oxford University, 1941.

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