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Book Review

John Aberth, *The Black Death: A New History of the Great Mortality in Europe, 1347-1500*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xxii + 394. Select Bibliography, Notes, and Index. $24.94 (paper).

Living amid the coronavirus pandemic and with plenty of other diseases—SARS, MERS, AIDS, Ebola—in recent memory, John Aberth's recent work is a timely study. The historian of Medieval Europe chronicles the Second Pandemic of the plague, more commonly known as the Black Death, from its origin in Central Asia to its westward expansion into the Mediterranean and Europe. He begins with an accessible introduction of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterial disease that causes the plague, as well as an explanation of how fleas spread the bacteria to hosts, like rodents and humans. Through a thorough analysis of primary sources, Aberth persuasively argues, "The Black Death is one of the most important events not just in European history, but in world history" (1). For instance, he posits that the socio-economic impact for survivors, such as the rise of real wages, the demise of serfdom, and greater access to land, "set the stage for the emergence of northwest Europe, in particular England and the Netherlands, as industrial and trading powers" and more broadly served as "an integral part of the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world" (232).

As a secondary theme, Aberth depicted the resilience of medieval people when confronting the Black Death. In contrast to many Muslim theologians, who viewed God as the plague's origin and therefore denied its contagion, Christian doctors encouraged flight as the best means to avoid contracting the disease. That some clergy abandoned impoverished parishes to administer to the needs of the nobility, intensified anxieties among commoners that their relatives would desert them if they became sick, they would be left unshriven, and their souls would spend eternity in purgatory. Despite such concerns, Aberth insisted that most people did not flee *en masse* as "notaries, priests, doctors, and judges all stayed to serve their fellow men. If they did not stay out of duty and honor to God and country, then it was undoubtedly out of loyalty to local bonds of friendship and community" (213). As a result, society did not collapse and Aberth optimistically concludes, "medieval Europe did survive their disease Apocalypse—even

one that, striking down every other person, exceeded their worst imaginings. Judging from the historical example, humankind can, and will, survive the next Black Death" (236).

Within the book's introduction, ten chapters, epilogue, and appendix, Aberth addresses the historiography of the Black Death and provides several new contributions to the literature. In the first chapter on the plague's geographical origins, for example, the author explores past attempts to map the Black Death. As historical interpretations, Aberth asserts that maps created by previous historians have been "reproduced countless times in textbooks" and have inaccurately taught "generations of students and teachers that the Black Death spread" in a neat continuous line (28). Since the plague spread by metastatic leaps from ships, he favors the Norwegian historian Ole Benedictow's 2004 "bold new map" as it incorporates nonuniform shading and arrows that depict dissemination from specific epicenters (29).

Aberth confronts the idea "that the Black Death killed only a third of Europe during its first outbreak in 1347-53" (35). He traces this "endlessly repeated" assumption back to "flimsy research" conducted by historian Josiah Cox Russell who used records of the English nobility as the primary source for his 1948 book on the plague. Aberth finds that this rate is too low as "the nobility, with their vastly better nutrition and hygiene, were hardly representative of the peasantry and the poor, who together made up both the majority of medieval population and the majority of the victims of the Black Death" (35). Instead, his demographic survey of archival sources puts the mortality rate closer to 51-58% (36).

Aberth introduces his Poison Thesis when addressing the medical community's reaction to the Black Death. Although this is the topic of his latest work, *Doctoring the Black Death: Medieval Europe's Medical Response to the Plague* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), in *The Black Death* he addresses the common misconception "that medieval doctors responded to the plague no differently than what they had been doing for centuries with regard to any other diseases" (60). In contrast, plague doctors devised "a unique response to the Black Death that more truly matched the unprecedented nature of the disease" (60) as they believed the plague resulted from the airborne transmission of poisonous matter. Aberth asserts that the notion of "ineffective doctors and treatments is wholly unsatisfactory as an overall analysis of late medieval plague medicine" and "in some respects, the poison thesis anticipated the germ theory of the nineteenth century" (82).

Later, the author seeks "to write a new history, and a new interpretation, of the flagellants during the Black Death" (146). Secondhand accounts, as well as those from hostile observers, mostly clergy, described the flagellant movement as an unorganized gang of religious zealots who traveled from town to town whipping themselves bloody before horrified onlookers. Overtime, these "negative views became our own, distorting both textbook histories…and popular representations" (146). However, Aberth believes

that a 2003 publication of a flagellant scroll from 1349 shows that they "aimed for a high degree of regularity and consistency in their ritual" and whipped "themselves in the hope that this would appease God's righteous anger against human wickedness and sin and so convince him to take away the plague" (146). Therefore, the author argues that the flagellants were a highly disciplined and organized group who "offered a much-needed psycho-spiritual outlet for people's fears and anxieties about the Black Death—at a time when the institutional Church was sorely struggling to do so." (147).

Finally, Aberth renames what historians have usually called the Jewish Pogroms, the Artificial Poison Conspiracy. When the plague reached parts of southern France, Catalonia, and Germany, inhabitants thought that outsiders had poisoned their water supply. Thus, the author maintains locals targeted those who traveled from town to town, like vagabonds and members of Christian religious orders, as well as their Jewish neighbors. He views "the plague as being central to why the pogroms occurred and the Jewishness of the victims as incidental, if still a factor" (170).

Aberth's intelligible writing style and solid arguments, in a volume with slightly fewer than 250 pages of text, is an approachable and informative read for students. Although his focus largely fell on the Great Mortality of 1347-53, unlike other scholars, Aberth did not ignore the subsequent outbreaks that recurred on a regular basis for the next 150 years. He also included Muslim and Christian reactions to the plague. Combined with its contemporary relevance, this work is a useful addition to undergraduate and graduate Western Civilization, European, and World History classes. If instructors wish to provide classes with the same general layout and arguments, while exposing their students to the primary sources Aberth cited—Michele de Piazza, Giovanni Boccaccio, ibn al-Khatib, et al—they could consider assigning his earlier work, *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350, a Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005).

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