



The Black Death 1346-1353: The Complete History

By Ole J. Benedictow

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Unique, sensational and shocking, this revelatory book provides, for the first time, a complete Europe-wide history of the Black Death. The author's painstakingly comprehensive research throws fresh light on the nature of the disease, its origin, its spread, on an almost day-to-day basis, across Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East and North Africa, its mortality rate and its impact on history. These latter two aspects are of central importance here, for it is demonstrated that the plague's death rates have consistently been under-estimated and that they were in fact much higher, making the disease's long-term effects on history even more profound.

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Editorial Review

From The New England Journal of Medicine

Two theses form the structure of this book: that the Black Death was the bubonic form of the rodent disease *Yersinia pestis* and was spread by fleas, and that it killed 60 percent or more of Europe's population with its first strike alone. To sustain these theses, the author has divided the book into 34 chapters that chart the spread of the plague country by country, even to places where few, if any, sources survive. But in places without sources or where the appearance of the Black Death was not reported, Benedictow nonetheless asserts that the plague struck and, except for a few tiny, isolated islands of population, killed 60 percent or more. In his argument that the plague was caused by *Y. pestis*, Benedictow relies heavily on the reports of the Indian Plague Research Commission, which were published during the first two decades of the 20th century. However, he has read these reports selectively. For instance, he maintains that the black rat (*Rattus rattus*) was responsible for plague in the years 1346 through 1353 as well as during the 20th century, but the Indian plague researchers found as many dead brown rats as black ones in dwellings where infection was active. In other, subtropical, zones such as northern Africa, scientists found that the black rat was the least important rat in the spread of plague to human populations; the brown rat and others such as *Mus alexandrinus* proved more deadly. Benedictow claims that "plague normally arrived with persons unwittingly carrying infective rat fleas in their clothing or luggage." But from studies of the clothing and luggage of tens of thousands of people migrating from plague-stricken regions, the plague commissioners concluded overwhelmingly that *Y. pestis* was not transmitted by these means. Benedictow argues that the Black Death and *Y. pestis* were both specific to households in terms of mortality -- if one member of a household contracted plague, the others soon became infected. The plague commissioners found the opposite to be true: in less than 4 percent of households was more than one person per household infected. Benedictow maintains that people in well-built stone housing were protected against plague because rats could not enter these dwellings. The plague commissioners again discovered the opposite: that rats penetrated stone and brick houses, even those with cement floors, inflicting some of the highest rates of death in these residences, whereas often some of the poorest people, living in bamboo huts, fared much better. Benedictow claims that during both plagues hospital workers were more susceptible than others. Yet in study after study, the plague commissioners reported that "the safest place to be in plague time is the plague ward." To their surprise, and in contrast to the experience during the Black Death, *Y. pestis* is hardly contagious even in its pneumonic form. Historians have realized since the work of Graham Twigg, in 1984, that the Black Death and the subtropical *Y. pestis* traveled at vastly different speeds. Even with the railway and the steamship, the 20th-century plague, because of its dependence on the homebound rat, spread overland at about 8 miles per year, whereas the contagious Black Death almost equaled that speed per day. Nonetheless, Benedictow tries to bring the two time frames closer together. He speeds up the 20th-century plague by reporting infection times only for California, where the disease is carried by the prairie dog, not the homebound rat, and has been known to move as fast as 15 miles per year. Benedictow devotes considerably more space to the slowing of the Black Death. For instance, he makes claims for earlier dates of departure of the plague at a given place, arguing that chroniclers or wills recorded the disease only after it had struck the elite members of a population; but then he does not use the same rules when discussing the plague's arrival at a second place. More often, however, Benedictow casts aside any rate of disease spread that was faster than he likes: at these junctures, the Black Death made "metastatic leaps." But even with his various stratagems, his results still show the medieval plague traveling 30 times as fast as the modern one -- a discrepancy he does not explain or even admit to. Casuistic sleights of hand plague Benedictow's demography almost as much as they do his epidemiology. When the data do not cooperate, he questions or rejects them outright. For instance, statistics from Mallorca show mortality rates of only 23 percent, but Benedictow brushes them aside, claiming that

they are "infested with major problems of demography, sociology and source criticism both with respect to the level of total mortality" -- that is, Benedictow's thesis that the Black Death everywhere killed off 60 percent or more of populations -- "and to the distribution of mortality between town and countryside." Benedictow claims that the distribution of mortality rates for the Black Death shows the patterns of Y. pestis infection in 20th-century India -- that the larger the population of a given place, the lower its rate of mortality. To make the data from the two plagues fit, he not only argues that the mortality rate from the Black Death was greater than the records say, he also argues the opposite, asserting that the most authoritative population statistics for Florence, Italy, for instance -- those of Herlihy and Klapisch -- are wrong, simply because they do not square with the Y. pestis deaths distributed over city and countryside. But, again, ultimately even his manipulation of the figures fails: his doctored mortality rates for the midsize town of Prato, in Italy, and the smaller villages of its countryside (contado), for instance, were the same (42.5 to 45 percent), and both were considerably lower than the rates for its much larger regional center, Florence. Benedictow's two overarching theses collide in the end. The mortality figures for Y. pestis, even in India -- where 95 percent of deaths from plague have been recorded since the discovery of the bacillus in 1894 -- accounted for less than 1 percent of India's population even during the years of highest mortality from plague. One must compare this with Benedictow's claim that 60 percent or more of Europe died from the Black Death in a single strike of the disease. *Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., Ph.D.*

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Review

Benedictow's book is highly recommended. It is well written and accompanied by many helpful maps and tables of data. --Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching

The thoroughness and precision of (Benedictow's) research are admirable. (...) Opens a treasure trove of correct information. There is no doubt that (the book) should be acquired by all university libraries. --Fifteenth-Century Studies

(This) remarkable, engrossing and controversial study is the first to assemble and synthesize historical data from every region in which the Black Death wrought havoc. (...) An immense and entirely breathtaking feat of scholarship...and a moving quest to account for a cruel phenomenon. --The Times Literary Supplement

About the Author

OLE J. BENEDICTOW is Professor of History at the University of Oslo.

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