

King Death. The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England

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The study of the Black Death has undergone something of a renaissance in recent years. A flurry of articles (including J. Hatcher, 'England in the aftermath of the Black Death', *Past and Present* 144 (1994)), a selection of sources (R. Horrox, *The Black Death* (1994)) and two syntheses (this one and M. Ormrod and P. Lindley, eds., *The Black Death in England* (1996)) have dealt specifically with late medieval plague. Other studies have taken plague as a focus or point of departure, for example, L.R. Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death. Essex 1350-1525* (1991). This interest stands in contrast, as Hatcher points out, to the view of the Black Death taken by historians at mid-century and it may be that the social and economic history of late medieval English society has emerged from the shadow of historians such as Postan and Levett, where the Black death was seen as a catalyst, not a prime mover. Colin Platt's *King Death. The Black Death and its aftermath in latemedieval England* is a work of synthesis which continues this trend. Written in a fairly chatty style (phrases such as 'Mickey Mouse numbers' and 'rich old ladies' abound) with a liberal sprinkling of modern marketing-speak ('shopping blight', 'customer base' and 'market spread', for example), it is a personal tour through a great deal of the recent secondary literature, largely generated by historians of town and countryside; the book also offers a brief survey of postplague art and architecture.

Beginning with Bridbury's well-known characterisation of the Black Death as 'more purgative than toxic', Platt treats his introductory chapter as an opportunity to run through much familiar material, including a quotation from the most obvious continental source, Boccaccio's *Decameron*. From late fourteenth century England, Knighton's chronicle is also quoted as is the chronicle of Meaux before Platt turns to examine data on mortality compiled by Hatcher and Harvey from the monastic communities of Canterbury and Westminster respectively. Poos' work on tithing data is also briefly considered and other local studies which touch on Black Death mortality are tapped in the search for some general percentage of plague deaths. Platt, as anyone who attempts a synthesis of this kind, is at the mercy of the historians whose work he uses. Important work by Razi on Halesowen and by Lock on Walsham-le-Willows is quoted and the figures given

there are accepted, seemingly without reservation. However the authors of both of these studies have assumed that the manor court rolls, upon which their research is based, offer records of total populations which they may well not; further, both Razi and Lock attempt to break down the tenant population according to age and produce very interesting but highly speculative results. Using the Walsham-le-Willows data, Platt is happy to report that 90 per cent of the elderly in the village died in 1349 whilst the plague spared most of those in their twenties (14 per cent mortality) and thirties (20 per cent mortality). Thus, he explains, the structure of landholding could happily recover from the removal of what was, essentially, surplus. The swift recovery which followed the first plague outbreak is, as he notes, well-attested and the seemingly eager acceptance of new opportunities by the offspring and lateral kin of the deceased is familiar. This is described in particular detail by Razi for Halesowen. But the interesting, and possibly problematic, thing about the Halesowen and Walsham-le-Willows data is that the age-structure of mortality, if such it is, runs counter to much that has been written on age-specific plague mortality in later periods. The cautionary note which both historians include with their results has been largely ignored by Platt and as a consequence the general reader will be left with an unrealistic expectation of what the demographic study of manorial court rolls can achieve. More demographic research of recent years is also presented as cut and dried (the manor of Coltishall in Cambridgeshire, recently studied by Bruce Campbell, is described as 'small but representative...of the region' (p.11)) when, in actual fact, most of the information is standing in the field, still waiting for the scythe.

This uncritical approach is most evident in Platt's description of household formation and age at marriage in rural communities where he examines the work of those historians who have recently attempted to show that low fertility rather than high mortality explains the population doldrums in which late medieval England fell becalmed. Platt embraces the fertility model of late medieval population stagnation wholeheartedly, and mortality which, of course, cannot be denied a major role in initial outbreaks is subsequently relegated to a bit-part. Rural communities were 'relatively immune from plague', writes Platt (p.34), and, having raised the problem of why population failed to recover in the century and a half after the arrival of plague, he then proceeds to describe recent research, particularly that by Poos on rural Essex, which has promoted the thesis of a shift to late marriage and the nuclear family subsequent to 1348/9.

There are a number of problems here which Platt does not address. Firstly, it is far from inconceivable that plague did continue to have an effect on rural populations, even in the fifteenth century. Jim Bolton, in his own recent overview of the social and economic impact of the Black Death, which includes a brief but valuable discussion of some of the epidemiological literature, seems to suggest that plague had become enzootic in late medieval England (J. Bolton, 'The world upside down'. Plague as an agent of economic and social change' in Ormrod and Lindley, eds., *The Black Death in England* p. 27); Robert Gottfried's well-known discussion of fifteenth century plague, although open to question, also argues that plague, travelling along the routes of commercialised late medieval England, continued to have an impact in the East Anglian countryside (R.S. Gottfried, *Epidemic disease in fifteenth century England. The medical response and the demographic consequences* (1978)). A second point which can be made here concerns family structure; Platt describes two very distinct periods in the history of medieval rural household formation: a pre-plague period when rural families lived in extended households and a post-plague period when these complicated structures were replaced by nuclear families as individuals made new choices about household formation. However, in terms of what is known about household formation systems, both past and present, even where extended families are seen as an optimum, the majority of household structures at any one time are likely to be simple rather than complex. This point offers a change of emphasis rather than of content in Platt's discussion but it is not where the real problem lies. The almost insurmountable problem which any discussant of rural, and, in particular, peasant, family structure faces for this period is that there is very little evidence which can shed light on peasant family and/or household forms at all: Platt, noting that large households could still, exceptionally, be found in the century after the Black Death, has to turn to the nobility for an example (p.37, referring to the 23 children Richard de Neville, Earl of Westmoreland). The thirteenth century serf lists, discussed by Hallam and, latterly, by Smith, are, prior to the 1377 and 1381 poll-taxes, the only nominative listings which can offer detailed insights into peasant family structures. Studies of manorial court rolls have, and may still, shed light on this area as may archaeology but, at present, there is

not the evidence to justify the categorical argument which Platt propounds. In fact, it is not inconceivable that population decline in the mid- to late fourteenth century could, in certain cases, have generated complex households as sons, with the added leverage of the threat of mobility, hastened the retirements of their parents; although this would seem, given late medieval evidence on mobility and the widespread availability of land, an unlikely scenario, the reality is, that for a good deal of the English population, we simply do not know. Further, although there is evidence for life-cycle service in late medieval England, this still needs testing outside of the regions, notably Yorkshire and Essex, in which it has so far been identified. Mark Bailey's combative and important article, published earlier this year in *Economic History Review*, and after the appearance of *King Death*, raises a number of questions about the overall validity of the demographic observations made by Poos and Goldberg: whether it provokes a response remains to be seen but Professor Platt's observations should certainly be read with Bailey's caveats in mind.

Extended attention has been given to the demographic discussion of plague's impact for the reason, already given, that this is an area of unresolved debate and, consequently, any attempt at an overview must be of interest. It is, however, not the only area of recent historical debate to which Professor Platt turns his attention; the related question of the extent of the plague's impact on the late medieval economy is also considered. In a chapter entitled 'shrunken towns', Platt reviews a number of the recent studies which have added their separate and often disharmonious voices to the 'urban decay' debate. Towns such as Wells, Boston, and Winchester are seen as, to a greater or lesser extent, 'genuine victims' of plague-induced, population decline; in contrast, the decline of Great Yarmouth, for example, cannot be so easily explained in terms of excessive mortality. However, Platt is keen to promote the demographic aspect of urban decay and concludes this chapter by suggesting that it was the failure of the countryside in the late middle ages to boost urban populations by migration that helps explain urban decay in this period. This is by way of introduction to his discussion of the demographic developments in villages, which has been considered, above. By extension, Platt suggests that fertility and not mortality also explains the problems faced by towns in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In subsequent chapters, Platt presents an analysis of the plague-related experience of the different components of late medieval society: nobility, gentry, and monks and nuns. In discussing the fortunes of the nobility in the later middle ages, Platt examines the experience of lay landlords, offering examples from the Stafford and Arundel estates, amongst others. The leasing of the demesnes is described here before Platt offers some thoughts on why English noble families did not generally replicate the success of the Grey's into the sixteenth century. Flawed succession, which opened the door to long-lived widows, seems to be the final verdict and Platt, in a style that is likely to prove provocative, wishes the dowagers ill. His approach stands in contrast to J.M.W. Bean's brief discussion of widow's dower in volume III of *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, where he suggests that 'landowners showed no concern about this aspect of feudal land law'. 'Biology - more than war, economic recession or the everlasting folly of politicians' also, according to Platt, explains the severe fluctuations in the fortunes of individual families of poorer knights and gentry in this period. Well-placed to take advantage of the failures of their social superiors, opportunity knocked in the form of political office and land, available through marriage. In order to preserve their estates, the gentry developed legal devices intended to ensure male succession and, increasingly, came to restrict rights of widow's dower. However, as Platt acknowledges, actual attempts to restrict dower were few and tardy, which seems to return us to Bean's comment, quoted earlier.

The decline, often severe, in the numbers of monks and nuns is also described by Platt. The ultimate failure of religious communities, done to death in the first half of the sixteenth century, was preceded by some earlier demises, the root cause of which may have pre-dated the Black Death but ends nonetheless that may have been hastened by the arrival of plague. A fall in numbers was also accompanied, eventually, by a loss of income as landed estates failed to make the returns which they had in earlier decades. Having described the increase in the monks' standard of living in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Platt suggests that the monastic existence became more lethargic and corrupt subsequent to plague's arrival. Quoting, in conclusion, Erasmus, he hints that the Reformation gained impetus from this.

Two chapters touch on the effect of plague on piety (chapter 7: 'Like people, like priest') and on revolt

(chapter 8: 'Protest and resolution'). In the first of these Platt begins with a discussion of the mortality amongst the clergy, which seems to have been significantly higher than that of the lay population., before proceeding to examine the spiritual impact of the plague and, in particular, the growing importance of chantries. In concluding the chapter he suggests that a scarcity of priests subsequent to 1349 had turned into an excess by the early sixteenth century which, in turn, had led to their alienation by a society which increasingly saw clerics as preoccupied with secular advancement. Platt's interpretation of the fluctuation of ordinations contrasts quite markedly with Christopher Harper Bill's recent overview of English religion after the Black Death, where the latter argues that the beginning of the decline in numbers of ordinations pre-dates the arrival of plague and that the sustained level of ordinations in the first decades after 1348/9 was a mark of genuine religious fervour.

The chapter on protest deals more with developments in the criminal legal machinery after the Black Death, rather than simply rehearsing again the events of 1381. Touching upon seigneurial reaction in the wake of plague and peasant, particularly villain, resistance to this, Professor Platt proceeds to discuss some of the recent literature describing late medieval developments in the common law and in office holding. The growing use of arbitration is also described and set within the context of the fifteenth century and the violence of the nobility. The message with which Platt leaves us is that legal cards are not dealt even-handedly and it is the dealers who tend to win; he recognises that if this is true for the post Black Death period it removes any claim of novelty for that time, at least in terms of justice. In his concluding chapter Platt returns to the theme of revolt, speculating that the plague helped spare England from rebellion. He sees plague in England as a defining moment which liberated great hordes of people (to a greater degree than any revolution could) but there is a danger here, which Platt acknowledges, of misrepresenting pre-plague England: the mobility, the security, the tolerated level of social protest which Platt describes for post-plague society does not, in all respects, stand in sharp and positive contrast to what went before. Poos, for example, is keen to suggest, in a contentious thesis, that the population of Essex was highly mobile even before 1348/9 (Poos, *Rural society*); further, the decline of serfdom also saw the disappearance of certain customary devices, such as widow's dower, that had offered a measure of protection to at least some sections of peasant society; finally, what we know of ecclesiastical courts from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century (admittedly very little) suggests that the public shaming of cuckolds and similar expressions of rule and misrule enjoyed a prominence in rural society which does not stand in contrast to what followed. None of which is to say that the Black Death did not have extraordinary and far-reaching effects on English society which, obviously, it did; instead, some greying of the distinctions is called for. For instance, one very real good which the Black Death and the Peasant's Revolt did combine to bring to an end was excessive taxation of the poorer elements of society. If, however, society's burden was being shifted in this way, other weights were being added and we should note that Harper-Bill, following Miri Rubin, suggests that it was the plague which first threw the 'sturdy beggar' on to the English social stage. C. Harper-Bill, 'The English Church and English religion after the Black Death' in Ormrod and Lindley, eds., *The Black Death in England*, p. 116.). *King Death* is not, however, just an attempt at a synthesis of recent work and there is much in the book that is generated by Professor Platt's particular research interests and expertise. Archaeological evidence is usefully integrated into the discussion on a number of occasions and Platt describes the plague's effect on art and architecture in the penultimate chapter. The late medieval culture of death is reviewed here and a number of examples of *memento mori* given. This chapter is well-supported by photographs and illustrations; carefully chosen and well-integrated with the text, these are amongst the highlights of the book in general (an aerial photograph of Ingarsby Grange in the snow, in the chapter entitled 'Of monks and nuns', is particularly appealing) and are at their most impressive here.

In a concluding chapter, sections of which have already been discussed, it is suggested that historians have been forced into tunnel vision by the periodisation of the subject. With this in mind, Professor Platt attempts to assess the plague's overall impact but still, despite his warning to avoid a too strict division of history, encourages us to see the Black Death as a point of crisis from which English society made real recovery. Alongside his concluding view that plague achieved what no English revolution could, the changing perception of death is also considered and a brief return is made to discussion of the art of dying. We are told that the legend of *The three living and the three dead* lost its levity after the Black Death; if it was a great

joke beforehand then the mid- fourteenth century marks a very real watershed indeed.

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