

embryology, via Arab translations, maintained that the mother provided the substance, not the form, of the embryo. If Christ, as the Nicene Creed stated, “took flesh” of the Virgin but nothing more, then her contribution, as Thomas Aquinas wrote, was no different from that of any other mother. The Franciscan view, articulated by John Duns Scotus, that Mary played an *active* role in the incarnation, was never accepted as orthodox, though the phenomenon of maternal imprinting—the formation of a foetus in the image of the mother’s imagination—seemed to offer a means. One might speculate that the rejection of a formative maternal contribution to the foetus was due in part to theological arguments against a co-redemptrix.

Van der Lugt does not address the wider theological issues or the “social or psychological dimension” of embryological theories. The presentation of primary material, much of it translated for the first time, is the book’s strength, making it the most comprehensive account of medieval embryology available. Though the book’s narrow focus necessarily leaves some peripheral areas, such as monstrous births and animal/human hybrids, unexplored, the re-establishment of theological embryology as a central theme is illuminating.

A W Bates,

Royal Free Hospital London

**Stuart J Borsch**, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: a comparative study*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2005, pp. xii, 195, £32.95 (hardback 0-292-707617-0).

*The Black Death in Egypt and England* is an ambitious study that asks an important question: against the same backdrop of demographic crisis wrought by plague, why did England expand economically, with its peasantry benefiting over the long run, while post-plague Egypt slumped, with peasants’ wages falling, rents rising, and the land deteriorating? This is not the first time a historian has asked why the Black Death was the pivotal moment of Middle Eastern decline, but earlier attempts were mere asides within larger

books and pointed to culture and religion to explain broad differences between “Islam” and “the west”. At the outset Borsch rejects these explanations as an “Orientalist trap”. He also wishes to reject any explanation that smacks of “geographical determinism”, one that emphasizes Egypt’s dykes, canals, irrigation, and the control of the Nile’s annual flooding as the key. Borsch turns instead to differences in landholding systems between Egypt and England to explain their divergent post-plague trajectories.

The Egyptian landholding system under the Mamluks (1250–1517) was unique. A caste of “slave soldiers” ruled Egypt with a system that prevented hereditary rule and ownership of the great landed estates. As a consequence, the Mamluks were absentee landlords with little incentive to invest in their estates and instead sought to maximize short-term profits at the expense of the land and the peasantry. After the Black Death this system led to over-exploitation and the disintegration of the vital infrastructure of canals, dykes, and dams. Peasant autarky and Bedouin infiltration ensued. Before the Black Death, however, this same system of landholding and political control had had the opposite outcome. The peasantry flourished (especially in comparison with their demographically hard-pressed counterparts in thirteenth-century England); Bedouin tribesmen were pushed to the margins, the irrigation system greatly expanded, and land under the plough increased by 50 per cent. While increased population had worsened the economic and social plight of the peasant in pre-plague England, in Egypt (1250–1348) these same demographic trends had benefited the peasant, the land, and the overall economy.

Despite Borsch’s predilections against stressing geographic variables, Egypt’s peculiar geography emerges as the key in his analysis for understanding this change of fate before and after plague—the country’s reliance on the flooding of the Nile. Before 1348 (or according to the chronicler Al-Maqrizi, circa 1400), Egypt’s surplus agricultural population (unlike England’s) was easily absorbed by the labour-intensive work of dredging canals, building dykes, and expanding the irrigation

system. After the plague, the countryside no longer had the human resources to maintain these systems, and the failure to maintain them led to water-logged soil, massive declines in productivity, the retreat of the peasantry from markets, and Bedouin occupation.

As Borsch states at the outset, Egypt's system of Mamluk landholding was unique, but was the decline of agriculture in the Middle East unique to Egypt? Further comparative work needs to be done, but as Michael Dols's *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1977) suggested, the problem of a long-term, post-plague economic downturn was more a territorial problem common to the Middle East than one that was unique to Egypt, where the Mamluks held their lands. As Marc Bloch taught us long ago, local causes cannot be relied on to explain larger regional differences. Furthermore, if landholding were the explanation, why did these conditions persist long after the Mamluks had been ousted in 1517? Finally, how would differences in the landholding system explain changes in culture from the Sultan Hasan mosque where secular studies in medicine and astronomy flourished before the plague to post-plague potentate cultural institutions "that contained almost nothing related to secular studies" (p. 114) and that endured to the nineteenth century? Further, why did medical plague tracts in the west change dramatically from those in the plague's immediate aftermath that saw all causation and cures of the plague as rooted in God's whims, to ones that boasted about doctors' own skills, experience, and experimentation in "triumphing over plague" by the end of the fourteenth century, while in the Middle East, the tracts developed in the very opposite direction? From stressing natural causes and pinpointing specific cases of plague, they became abstract theological texts.

Unfortunately for the readers of this journal, Borsch makes no attempt to compare descriptions of plague by contemporaries in Egypt and England or to speculate on epidemiological differences or similarities. Only the first nine pages concern the disease at all, and these are under-researched. He shows a misunderstanding of *Yersinia pestis*, suggesting that flies can be its vector and all forms of

cattle, its carrier. None the less, Borsch's comparative work is a welcome breath of fresh air to plague studies, but, as he suggests, further comparative work is needed. Let's hope others will follow his lead.

**Samuel K Cohn, Jr,**  
Glasgow University

**Ole J Benedictow, *The Black Death 1346–1353: the complete history***, Woodbridge and Rochester, Boydell Press, 2004, pp. xvi, 433, illus., £30.00 (hardback 0-85115-943-5).

At first sight the subtitle of this book may seem somewhat pretentious. The author hastens to explain that this is not the case: the book is not and cannot be a definitive history. It is complete in the sense that it seeks to sum up present knowledge of the Black Death, how and when it spread, the mortality and the consequences. It aims at presenting the "Stand der Forschung". It is, however, not a very reliable guide. Even in the first part of the book, which considers the nature of the plague, this becomes apparent.

Benedictow has always been a strong advocate of the conventional retrospective diagnosis, which identifies late medieval and early modern plague with modern bubonic plague, a primarily tropical disease spread by rats and fleas, a diagnosis which originated with Alexandre Yersin himself. And Benedictow's dissertation (*Plague in the late medieval Nordic countries*, Oslo, 1992) was exactly an attempt to explain how this tropical disease could actually spread in a sparsely inhabited (and rather cold) country such as late medieval Norway.

At no point, however, is there any indication in Benedictow's new *Complete history* that this diagnosis has been called in question over the last thirty years and that many (if not most) specialists today consider the diagnosis untenable and refrain from trying to identify historical plague with any modern disease.

It is, of course, quite legitimate to uphold the traditional diagnosis and to disagree with biologists and historians such as Graham Twigg (*The Black Death: a biological reappraisal*, London, 1984), Susan Scott and Christopher