

Duncan (*Biology of plagues: evidence from historical populations*, Cambridge, 2001), Samuel K Cohn Jr (*The Black Death transformed: disease and culture in early Renaissance Europe*, London, 2001) and other critics of the traditional diagnosis, but it is not—to put it charitably—an acceptable scholarly approach simply to pretend that they do not exist. They do not figure even in the bibliography. The reader is left wondering what else Benedictow may have ignored because it does not agree with his points of view. Further suspicions are raised when you turn to the chapters on Scandinavia. Janken Myrdal's thorough research on the plague in Sweden (*Digerdöden, pestvågor och ödeläggelse. Ett perspektiv på senmedeltidens Sverige*, Stockholm, 2003) may have been too recent for consideration by Benedictow, but he consistently disregards any modern Norwegian historian who disagrees with him.

The book certainly contains a lot of information, some of it easily available elsewhere. The chapter on the Middle East is really not much more than a paraphrase of Michael Dols' *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1976). For Eastern Europe and France, Benedictow relies on Jean-Noël Biraben's great (but also dated) *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris, 1975). Among the sources for the British Isles are, besides Charles Creighton's *A history of epidemics in Britain* (Cambridge, 1891), J F D Shrewsbury, *A history of bubonic plague in the British Isles* (Cambridge, 1970), and Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Harmondsworth, 1970), all dated as well.

Benedictow assures the reader that all efforts have been done to consult original sources, yet Byzantium is covered by referring to Biraben's paraphrase of the Italian Matteo Villani's account, even though the chief contemporary Greek sources such as John Cantacuzenos and Nicephoros Gregoras are available in translation.

In the final bibliography of almost twenty pages one misses several recent publications

such as David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the transformation of the west* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), and Colin Platt, *King Death: the Black Death and its aftermath in late-medieval England* (London, 1996).

Oversights and omissions can hardly be avoided in a work of synthesis. Also, synthesis involves questions of priorities. What makes Benedictow's book incomplete, however, is that it is biased. So biased, in fact, that it can be used only with great caution.

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Laura Vivanco, *Death in fifteenth-century Castile: ideologies of the elites*, Colección Támesis, Serie A, Monografías, 205, Woodbridge, Tamesis Books, 2004, pp. vii, 211, £45.00, US\$75.00 (hardback 1-85566-100-4).

Since the studies by Philippe Ariès (1949, 1974) and Michel Vovelle (1983), western attitudes towards death have been the subject of many historical works. The one reviewed here has turned its attention to the elites in medieval Castile. Its conclusions are based on a large number of written sources of different kinds, mostly legal texts (codes, wills), historical chronicles, religious works, and literary writings. With no explicit reference to the *longue durée*, Laura Vivanco's analysis of the responses to death by the fifteenth-century Castilian elites stresses their continuities with the previous and following centuries, and emphasizes death as a everyday reality, beyond the macabre, "gothic" vision with which medieval death has been too often associated.

Vivanco's monograph originated in her PhD dissertation at the Department of Spanish, University of St Andrews, and appears to be greatly indebted to the "history of mentalities" tradition. She has organized the discussion around the theory of the "three orders" that, according to Georges Duby (1978), were major structuring elements of the imagery of feudal society, namely *oratores* (*oradores* in Vivanco's book), *defensores*, and *laboratores*,

on the assumption that these orders or states represent ideological paradigms more than properly social groupings. Since her attention is focused on the attitudes of social elites, her work is confined to the narratives of those *oradores* and *defensores* belonging to the ruling elites, without forgetting those reflecting positions halfway between both of these states. Examined texts have included not only those written by the elites, but also those addressed to them.

Apart from its introduction and conclusion, Vivanco's study is structured into three major chapters where she successively deals with the varieties of dying breaths and deaths (pp. 27–98), the views of the afterlife (pp. 99–135), and the diversity of practices and rituals relating to the deceased's burial and remembrance by the bereaved (pp. 136–77). In all the three chapters, *oradores'* and *defensores'* responses have been examined in parallel so as to reveal the similarities and differences between the ideologies of death typical of both states. From the premise that all the members of the elites were baptized as Christians, the dichotomy good *versus* bad death is an essential axis of the study. Certainly, Vivanco has considered the peculiar case of the Jewish *converso* elites, and she has not entirely ruled out the presence of hidden sub-texts in their narratives, but she claims that during the fifteenth century they did not show attitudes which significantly diverged from the rest. However, she does notice—and indeed she emphasizes—substantial differences between *oradores* and *defensores* in their reactions to death, and in the values they inherited, those of the latter often being non-Christian to such an extent that they formed a coherent code or ideology which persisted despite the Church's teachings. Specific attention has also been paid to the relationship between grief and social status as well as to the varying attitudes of women in the face of death, which are examined with concepts and tools from gender studies.

Vivanco successively looks into the narratives concerning deaths both natural and violent (in battle, sudden death by outside agency, death imposed by the judicial system, suicide), with particular attention to premonitory signs or

auguries of an imminent death, last wishes in wills, rituals of extreme unction and the variable symbolism of anointing different parts, the insistence on the soul's salvation over the body's health, the question of miracles, the relevance of the geography of the afterlife (with reference to Le Goff), the variety of punishments according to the deceased's sins, ways and places for burials, the issues of the deceased's clothes and of the ornamentation of the grave, the demonstrations of grief, and the values that were extolled or denigrated on the occasion of *oradores'* and *defensores'* death.

In short, Laura Vivanco's monograph is a valuable contribution to the study of the culture of European elites during the fifteenth century—a period still demanding greater attention by historians. Its main worth lies in the systematic and exhaustive analysis of the relevant Castilian written sources of that century, which the author has carried out with a mastery of textual criticism.

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Corinna Treitel, *A science for the soul: occultism and the genesis of the German Modern*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004, pp. x, 366, illus., £33.00 (hardback 0-8018-7812-8).

There is much to be admired in this thoroughly researched work on the history of German occultism between 1877 and 1937. It should, however, be read in combination with and almost as a sequel to Diethard Sawicki's similar, but more wide ranging, seminal study, *Leben mit den Toten: Geisterglauben und die Entstehung des Spiritismus in Deutschland 1770–1900* (Paderborn, 2002). Although presented by the author as a blend of cultural history and the history of science, it might be more precise to see *A science for the soul* as a major contribution to a new and exciting field of research that has increasingly taken shape in recent years—not the least since the establishment of the journal *Aries* in 2001—i.e. the history of western