

## BOOK REVIEWS

Ole J. Benedictow, *The Complete History of the Black Death*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021), pp. 1058, £ 143, hardback, ISBN: 9781783275168.

A specialist in the epidemiology and history of the plague in the Nordic countries, to which he devoted his thesis, Ole Benedictow extended his investigation to the second great pandemic to offer a first version of this book in 2004 entitled *The Black Death, 1346–1353. A Complete History*. ‘A complete...’ on the dust jacket but already *The Complete history* on the front page! ‘A’ would have been more modest, even if the challenge was already audacious. This second edition is considerably expanded and demonstrates how much the historical discipline, like any field of knowledge, is an unfinished process, but one that never stops: ‘a complete history of that epic epidemic does not imply its final history’, advised the author in his preface to the first edition (p. xv). This edition is enriched by more than twice as many pages, correcting, completing, discussing and clarifying many of the chapters in an almost identical order to the previous version. The bibliography increases from nineteen to eighty-four pages, even if the references to Wikipedia or Google Books (pp. 934–5) artificially (but honestly!) enlarge this volume.

The proposed panorama covers all the areas of diffusion of the ‘black death (*mors nigra*)’ – the term used in Paris from 1349 to 1350 by the Liège canon Simon de Covino. However, there is no evidence that Simon was a physician, even if he may have lived in Montpellier: Ernest Wickersheimer’s famous biographical dictionary of physicians or the 1974 article devoted to Corvino by Christine Renardy would have made it easy to verify this.<sup>1</sup> The expression was used again in school textbooks (1822) in England. Contrary to what O. Benedictow asserts (pp. 3–4), it was preferentially used in German historiography from the pioneering work of J.F.E. Hecker, *Der schwarze Tod in vierzehnten Jarhundert* (Berlin, 1832), that of Robert Hoeniger (Berlin, 1882) up to the classic work of Johannes Nohl (Potsdam, 1924) and more recently that of Klaus Bergdolt (München, 1994, new edition 2011). In France, the first use of the term was by Adrien Philippe in his *Peste noire* (Paris, 1853). An English synthesis written in 1865 by Frederic Seebohm (*Fornightly Review*, 2) used the expression to qualify ‘The Great pestilence now commonly known as The Black Death’ according to the title given by Francis Gasquet to his foundational book of 1893. A more detailed historiographical reminder would have been welcome.

Of course, it is impossible to master everything in such a considerable mass of documentation on a global scale (covering Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia): this poses a real challenge, according to the author’s own introduction! It requires the collection of a multitude of documentary sources or, more precisely, the most exhaustive possible examination of an infinite number of local and regional monographs and scholarly articles of all origins and languages, but also of various specialities depending on the multiform impact of the disease (demography, biology, economics, religion, culture etc.). However, although many studies had focused on the effects of the Great Plague, a little attention had been paid to the geographical spread of the epidemic, its modalities, its rhythms and its precise demographic impact (p. xv). It is therefore to this subject that this book is mainly devoted.

Some works had already paved the way. In particular, and without any misplaced chauvinism on the part of the author of this review, it is regrettable that Jean-Noël Biraben’s two important volumes on *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris–La Haye, 1975) have not been translated into English, as they are full of valuable information and his bibliography (more than 200 pages) was the most complete on this date. With J.F.D. Shrewsbury on *the Bubonic plague in the*

<sup>1</sup>Ernest Wickersheimer, *Dictionnaire biographique des médecins en France au Moyen-Âge*, vol. 2 (new edn and *Supplément* by Danielle Jacquart, Paris–Genève: Droz, 1979); Christine Renardy, ‘Un Témoin de la Grande Peste: Maître Simon de Couvin, chanoine de Saint-Jean l’Évangéliste à Liège’, *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 2 (1974), 273–92.

*British Isles* (1971), or the documentary trails produced by Philip Ziegler (1969) or Rosemary Horrox (1994), David Herlihy (1965–91), Élisabeth Carpentier (1963) and M. Livi Bacci for Italy (1978), Marie-Hélène Congourdeau for the Byzantine territory (1988–98) or Michael Dols (1974–82) and Mohammed Melhaoui (Paris, 2005, not cited) for the Arabic world (Egypt and North Africa) provide a base of capital data. The considerable amplification of these publications follows the most extensive territorial scale envisaged. The main purpose is to trace the outbreak and spread of the pandemic: its origin, its modes of diffusion, the epidemic progress, in order to better understand the epidemiological mechanism, its nature, and to evaluate its incidence of lethality and mortality.

The echo of these issues with the global pandemic situation arising in 2019–20 with COVID-19 may have justified the interest of this new edition. Similarly, since 2004, the new availability of historical sources on the Internet has permitted access to greater and more substantial information on Russia, Italy, Poland and Central Europe. While the first evidence from the genetic examination of dental pulp dates the origins of the plague back to around 5,100–4,900 years ago in Sweden (p. 98), the emergence of research in palaeobiology, in particular on DNA (Hinnebusch, 2002–17, Bos, Holmes, Callaway, in *Nature*, 2011, Wagner, *Lancet*, 2014), has provided a very supportive context for knowledge renewal: a ‘molecular history’ (McCormick, 2007) is open! For example, it has brought to light the acquisition of a gene (*Yersinia murine toxin/ymt*) allowing its ingestion and conservation by the flea between 1700 BCE in the Altai region and 950 BCE in Armenia on the shores of the Caspian Sea (pp. 98–9): however, can one say, as the author writes, that this is a zoonosis of human origin? Its bubonic characteristics, which were probably unknown until this time, opened up new forms of transmission, of which the black rat could be the vector in close association with the flea, or at least a species of flea, since the question of the presence of the black rat in Europe as well as the species of flea (*Xenopsylla cheopsis* versus *Pulex irritans*) has been also debated. Similarly, the great stability of the bacterium *Yersinia Pestis* from its outbreak in 1346–8 to the present day seems to contrast with the extinction of the strain of the first pandemic (known as ‘Justinian plague’, between 541 and 767). New work has emerged from numerous demographic and archaeological studies: I indicate in particular, L. Cowal *et al.*, *The Black Death Cemetery. Est Smithfield, London* (2008). Some of these are strongly disputed by the author, such as D.C. Mengel’s article (pp. xxv and 578–84), questioning the presence of the plague in Bohemia (*Past & Present*, 2011), S. Scott and C.J. Duncan’s introduction of a mathematical epidemiological model to replace the diagnosis of plague with a variant of Ebola disease or Namouchi *et al.* (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, 2018) inventing a supposed fur route to replace that of silk or spices as the path of the disease from East Asia. These heated criticisms, not to say polemical discussions, were collected by the author in a book published in 2010 (*What Disease was Plague? On the Controversy over Microbiological Identity of Plague Epidemics of the Past*. Leiden). He lists fourteen assertions or ‘alternative theories’ that he does not hesitate to describe as ‘fake science’ (pp. xxi–xxvi). This severity of judgement is the result of a very rigorous approach.

No fewer than forty-five chapters punctuate the text divided into four main parts: 1) What was the Black Death? (pp. 1–96); 2) The origin of Bubonic Plague and the History of Plague before the Black Death (pp. 97–134); 3) The outbreak and the spread of the Black Death (pp. 135–643) and 4) Mortality in the Black Death (pp. 645–885). This composition has a very unbalanced form, and the disparity of the different chapters accentuates this impression. The first chapter, devoted to the historical and epidemiological definition of the disease, is six pages long; the second, covering the ‘historical’ character of the disease, is barely five, and is very vague and general. Chapter 11 takes seven pages to discuss ‘The importance of Ships and spread of the Black Death’; whereas Chapter 32 discusses Greenland, Iceland, Finland and countries that escaped the Black Death over just three pages. In comparison, Chapters 20 and 42 spend 64 and 77 pages, respectively, to discuss the spread in Great Britain and the mortality in England. The second part contains only one chapter (pp. 97–135). The fifth and final part (pp. 889–97), ‘The Black Death: A Turning Point in History?’ (title perhaps inspired by William Bowsky’s book, 1971, not cited), serves as a conclusion. Unfortunately, the banality of this short section (with its limited discussion of ‘structural change’, ‘the rise of capitalism’, ‘impetus toward modernization’ etc.) contrasts

with the finesse of analysis that precedes it. But, in this epilogue, why is there no mention of the persistence of epidemics in 1360, 1369, 1374, 1382, 1400... up to twenty-five times again at least until 1720 in Marseille? More than the single crisis due to the brutal outbreak of 1348–52, these repetitions and their cumulative effects – admittedly of varying intensity and location – are the only ones to make sense of the evolution of wages and prices over the long term, which the author presents in the form of figures (pp. 892–3) without clearly identifying the sources (David Farmer, *Agrarian History of England*, 1997; John Hatcher, 1977/2008?). A comparison would have been useful, especially as the bibliography is virtually identical.

The choice of a country-by-country presentation (in the geography of the current states of Europe), with unequal treatment of each according to the sources of information available, leads to repetitions, such as that concerning Belgium, the Low Countries and the Netherlands (pp. 304–13 and pp. 496–503): of course, it is understood that the epidemic penetrated these countries in different ways, one from the south (France) and the other from the west (Germany), but to what extent? This impression is accentuated by the repetition of the same enumeration by country in Part 4, examining mortality. A table on mortality statistics in France between 1347 and 1349 is repeated identically twice (no. 43 p. 767 and no. 59 p. 873); the main matter of this chapter is limited to Burgundy (the data of the famous register of Givry) and the southern regions, whereas studies exist on Poitou, Anjou, Touraine and others. More thematic chapters, generally short, synopate this panorama, such as the one on the role of sailing in the transmission of the epidemic, which could have been combined with the previous one on the initial spread of the disease, or the general epidemiological considerations of Chapter 12, which would have been better placed in the first part presenting the general characteristics of the disease (Chapter 4).

In any case, in the end, this gives an encyclopaedic aspect to the book: so many files, so many steps, so many countries visited one after the other according to the progression of the epidemic and the progress of the investigation led by the author and intended to be almost exhaustive. In addition, each of the stages is extremely detailed, discussed, in an almost hypercritical manner, to the point that the author does not seem to feel any doubt, nor even to admit to very few hypotheses, even though he constantly doubts both the sources and, above all, the research work that preceded him. Methodical criticism? However, it will be difficult to agree with some assertions about the consequences of the Black Death quickly summarised: for example, that the Hundred Years War ‘gave rich opportunities’ for the combatants to compensate for the loss of their seigneurial incomes (p. 12), or that Hippocrates must be considered as ‘a mythical person’ (p. 104).

One of the major problems is that ‘not all plagues are *the* plague’, to use Rosemary Horrox’s fortunate phrase. Since Thucydides in the Antiquity, the concept of plague has become a paradigm, as we showed a few years ago.<sup>2</sup> So, theories as numerous as fictitious even imagined that *the* plague was not the plague! However, do we have to wait for historical sources to detail a symptomatology that corresponds precisely to current clinical descriptions to be sure of its presence? Admittedly, the bivalence of the vocabulary can be heavily misleading, but does the absence of (absolute) evidence mean the evidence of absence? Following John Norris (1977), the author considers it a mistake to identify with the plague the pestilence or epidemic inscriptions found on tombstones in the cemetery of Yssyk Kul, in north-western Khirghistan near the Chinese border, and dated to the years 1338–9. This, combined with the closure of the ‘Silk Road’ after the Mongols’ conversion to Islam in 1313, rules out any Chinese origin of the disease as well as its spread to the whole of Asia (India or China) and even directly to Russia. Therefore, according to Russian (even late) and Greek sources (Nikephoros Gregoras), the original focus was in the Volga delta, between the Caspian, Azov and Black Sea, in the major settlement area of the Golden Horde. To its outlet, the Venetian and Genoese trading posts of Tana and Caffa in turn served as centres of diffusion towards Persia (Tabriz) and Anatolia (Trebizond), before reaching Constantinople and the Mediterranean coasts.

<sup>2</sup>F.-O. Touati, ‘La peste comme modèle’, in *Images de la maladie, Sources. Travaux historiques* (Paris, 1990), 6–8.

The chronicle of the Florentine Matteo Villani, the testimonies of the two Andalusian physicians, Ibn Khâtima and Ibn al-Khatîb, and the travel story by Ibn Battûta, all contemporaries of the event, should have been discussed here. It is owing to them, and to the information of a Christian merchant coming from Samarqand, that the repeated idea of an outbreak of the epidemic from China (the usual translation given for *al-Khitâ*) or from India is based. However, instead of relying on the simple silence of the sources (which can be disputed!) even if this has been recently defended by two authors (G. Sussman, 2011, and P.D. Buell, 2012), a critical return to historical geography would have provided a better argument. The Arab chroniclers perfectly distinguish *al-Khitâ*, a Persian term, from China proper denoted *as-Sîn* in Arabic. So, which country was this? North China versus South China? The *Bilad al-Khitâ* must first and foremost be identified as the countries of the Mongol Empire, a space as vast as it is shifting, conquered or traversed from the tenth century by the Khitai Mongols to the Crimea: a territory that Marco Polo and the Latins called *Catai* by extrapolation or confusion with *Sîn*! A generation later, the Egyptian historian Ibn al-Maqrîsi confirmed this identification with the territory of the Great Khan (*al-Qan al-Kabîr*). The coincidence of this pole of resurgence on the shores of the Caspian Sea with one of the limits reached by the first pandemic in Azerbaijan (according to Procopius in 543) would also have been worth noting: could this area have constituted an endemic reservoir six or seven centuries apart? However, how can we explain the demographic collapse of China with the loss of 35 million inhabitants between 1331 and 1393? O. Benedictow considers impossible the famous episode of biological or germ warfare related by Gabriele de Mussis. According to the famous notary of Piacenza, presumed to have been on the spot, the Mongols besieging the Italian Christians of Caffa contaminated them by lobbing the corpses of plague-stricken men over the walls of the town (pp. 148–52).

Many preconceived notions are thus revised, highlighting new achievements. The dynamics of the epidemic's spread, traced almost day by day according to its epidemiological characteristics, leads first of all to the conclusion that the bubonic form of the plague was preeminent. It saw the introduction of a new seasonal mortality pattern, with warm springs and high summer rates, supermortality among women and children, and an inverse correlation between deaths and population density, which was fatal to the poorest, as the cases of England and France clearly show. Finally, the death rates proposed by the author are most frequently close to 50% of the population, reaching peaks in Catalonia (77%) and up to 90% in certain localities of Tuscany! If we estimate the population of Europe at 80 million, the overall loss would have been 52 million, or 65%, in just 3 years! In 1924, Johannes Nohl reported the number established at the instigation of Pope Clement VI at nearly 43 million. These spectacular figures reflect the scale of the cataclysm felt.

O. Benedictow's analysis is very demanding and detailed. However, can it be described as a 'holistic study' or a 'total history' (p. xvii) as he suggests? The study is based on a mountain of data: faced with the merit of such a work, it would be churlish or inelegant to add a forgotten or not mentioned source or to point out the lack of an article or reference. The tracing of the disease, its observation at different scales and its demographic impact over a short period of time are remarkably well documented, the maps and figures perfectly clear and useful. What remains to be done is to further measure its ecological insertion and evolution within the various pathocenoses, its relations with the zoonoses or epizootic diseases (attested by the *Knigh-ton's Chronicle*, among others...), the causes and effects of climatic and environmental mutations, the series of natural catastrophes (earthquakes, famines, floods and volcanic eruptions) that preceded its outbreak, the factors of receptivity or human behaviour that this considerable catastrophe may have favoured, the comparison of structures and exchange networks as well as the immediate social, political and mental reactions, among others. Involving the long term, these multi-faceted interactions would justify extending the approach by a global study, 'rethinking the Black Death', as proposed by Monica Green (2014).

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