

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.

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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

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 Tamesis, 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*,