

Things to think about: The Black Death

Herlihy

How can the Black Death be considered a natural or ecological disaster?

What are the comparisons Herlihy makes between the Black Death and AIDS? Is this a useful comparison?

Why does Herlihy review the etymology of the term 'Black Death' (19-20)? How is this relevant to his argument in the first essay?

Why is Herlihy skeptical that the Black Death was bubonic plague?

How did contemporaries describe the effects of the plague? How do the eyewitness reports, anecdotes and fictional accounts of contemporary observers (Boccaccio, Vendetti, Guy de Chauliac and others) inform our understanding of the plague?

Herlihy makes clear that some aspects of the Black Death remain mysterious even as he offers new interpretations of its etiology. How does he make use of current scientific and medical knowledge to understand the history of the Black Death?

Herlihy agrees with the historian Bruce Campbell that the plague was an 'exogenous variable' (34). How is the distinction between exogenous and endogenous factors relevant to Herlihy's challenge to the Malthusian interpretation of Europeans' vulnerability to the plague?

What were the short and long-term economic and demographic consequences of the 'shock' of the epidemics of the late 14th and 15th centuries?

How did the epidemic crises of the late Middle Ages affect marriage and inheritance patterns?

Why did the plague create or intensify suspicion, hatred and violence against marginal social groups like Jews, travelers, and prostitutes?

How did the plague bring a "crisis of confidence in expert opinion" and encourage an anxiety about the deterioration of Europe's "cultural heritage" (69)?

Herlihy writes that the Black Death impacted "the social and cultural life of Europe" (59) and his title indicates that the plague transformed "the West." Are his generalizations about the experience and impact of the Black Death across Europe plausible? Convincing?

What implications does Herlihy's emphasis on the impact of the Black Death have for other potential causes of change in the late Middle Ages?