ECO 301Y1

The Economic History of Later-Medieval and Early Modern Europe, 1250 - 1750

Topic 1 [1]: The Black Death, Late-Medieval Demographic Crises, and the Standard of Living Controversies

Recommended readings: the more important ones are indicated by asterisks *

A. Demographic Changes in Medieval Europe: General Surveys


B. Plagues, and other Demographic Crises in Late-Medieval Europe

2. Lester K. Little, ‘Plague Historians in Lab Coats: A Review Article’, Past & Present, no. 213 (November 2011), pp. 267-90. This is the most recent contribution to the controversy, summarizing the now voluminous scientific evidence that both the Justinian Plague (541-750 CE) and the subsequent Black Death (from 1347) were indeed manifestations of true plague, having as its pathogen the bacillus *Yersinia Pestis* (as is indisputably the case for the Third Pandemic, from 1894). But this study also leaves unresolved the method of transmission, in the light of Cohn’s observations.

3. John Theilmann and Frances Cate, ‘A Plague of Plagues: The Problem of Plague Diagnosis in Medieval England’, Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 37:3 (Winter 2007), 371-93: a review article that also provides a serious challenge to Cohn’s unorthodox views: also arguing that it was a form of bubonic plague, though different form later mutated versions; but also that the Black Death may have been largely pneumonic plague; and that the death toll was magnified by other factors.


D. The Black Death, Labour, and the Standard of Living Controversies:


D. Regional Studies: Italy, the Low Countries, England


QUESTIONS:
1. There are essentially three major issues in this debate:
   a) what were the essential and most important causes of late-medieval population decline?
   b) What was the late-medieval Black Death? Was it truly bubonic plague; and if so, how did it spread so far, so rapidly, and with such enormous, unprecedented mortalities?
   c) what were primary economic and social consequences of late-medieval population decline: did it lead to a rising in living standards, indeed to the ‘Golden Age of the Artisan’ by the mid fifteenth century?

2. Were the essential causes of later medieval population decline endogenous or exogenous to the European economy?

3. What were the causes of the Great Famine of 1315-1322? Was Europe the victim of a Malthusian crisis of overpopulation from the early 14th century? Did such conditions increase the mortality from both the Great Famine, and then, subsequently, from the Black Death itself?

4. What is the current debate about the biological and epidemiological nature of the Black Death and of the modes of its transmission. Was it in fact bubonic plague, and was it caused by rat fleas that carried the bacillus \textit{Yersinia pestis}?

5. What havoc did the Black Death inflict? How did it spread? What were the particular economic and social consequences of the Black Death and subsequent plagues: what were the regional differences?

6. Did plague and depopulation lead to a rise in real wages and living standards in late-medieval Europe. If so, whose living standards in particular? If not, why not?

7. Why was demographic decline and/or stagnation so prolonged in late-medieval Europe: why did it last until the later 15th century? When and why did population decline come to an end -- finally? How, when, where, and why did European demographic recovery recommence?