Late Medieval Europe and the "Calamitous" 14th century

Late Middle Ages: Pro & Con

- Gothic cathedrals arise
- Early humanism is born
- Universities are founded
- Cities grow
- Vernacular languages proliferate
- Population and food production increase
- Seeds of modern nations created (e.g., legal systems, tax structures, bureaucracy, representative institutions)

- Poor food
- Difficult labor for men, women, & children
- Massive illiteracy
- Disease, ice, rats are common
- Violence is prevalent (including sexual assault)
- Little religious tolerance
- "Survival" is main goal of 98% of population
- War, Rebellion, Plague, Famine...

Late Medieval Europe (14th c.)

- "A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century" (B. Tuchman)
- "A bad time for humanity…." (J.C. de Sismondi)
- "characterized by economic chaos, social unrest, inflation, depraved morals, lack of production, frenetic gaiety, wild expenditures, luxury, greed, avarice, idolatry…." (J. W. Thompson)
- "An age of disasters." "one of the most catastrophic periods of all human history." (J. Zophy)
Problems in the 14th century

- War
- Rebellion
- Famine
- Religious schism
- Plague

War in 14th century

- Hundred Years War (1337-1453)
  - Issue: who should be king of France?
  - Locale: largely fought in France
  - Significance:
    - Use of new weapons @ Crecy, Poitiers, Agincourt
    - Consolidation of French and English monarchies, & FR victory
    - Destruction of lands, people, & resources, esp. in FR. → famine, social unrest
    - Legend of Joan of Arc

- War of the Roses (England, 1455-1485)
  - Issue: who should be king of England?
    - → Tudor dynasty

- Islam threatens Byzantines, Balkans, & Vienna
  - 1396: Muslims destroy Christian army in Bulgaria

Prior to the 100 Years War (12th c.)
New forms of warfare

Battle of Crecy (1346)

The French besiege Brest, c. 1373
War in 14th century

- Hundred Years War (1337-1453)
  - Significance:
    - Use of new weapons (longbow, pike, crossbow, cannon)
    - Consolidation of French and English monarchies (Valois, Tudor)
    - Destruction of lands, people, & resources → famine, social unrest.
    - Legend of Joan of Arc (d. 1431) as patron saint of France; yet the Inquisition destroys her b/c of threat of heresy.

Rebellion in 14th century

- Jacquerie (1358)
- Ciompi Revolt (1378)
- English Peasants Rebellion (1381)

- Causes: unemployment, poverty, social tensions, guild restrictions, fear of plague, demand for higher wages after plague

The "Jacquerie": a revolt of peasants and townspeople in France, 1358; there were similar outbreaks in Italy, Germany, and England
English Peasant’s Revolt (1381)

Famine in 14th century

- Causes:
  - Little Ice Age
    - Baltic Sea freezes;
    - Alpine glaciers grow;
    - Iceland’s grain stops
  - Limited transportation
  - Lack of labor (very low agricultural yield)
  - Poor diet to begin with
  - Slow transition to 3-field system

14th c. Famine
Religious Schism in 14th century

• “schism” = split, division, or separation
• Questions:
  • (1) Does pope have temporal or spiritual power?
  • (2) Who has ultimate authority in Catholic Church?
  • (3) What is the balance between king and pope?
• Babylonian Captivity (1309-1377)
  – Pope moves to Avignon under influence of French monarchy
• Great Schism (1377-1417)
  – Two popes, then three, and finally Council of Constance settles the issue

Popes in Avignon

• Feast of John XXII (1324)
• Petrarz’s criticism (Noble, p. 357-8)
• Result: distrust of Church and its hierarchy; encouragement of belief in self-salvation;

The Black Death
The course of the Black Death

(see also Noble, p. 371)

What is “the plague”?

• Formally “Yersinia Pestis” (bacteria)
• Other plagues:
  • Pestis antiqua = from Africa to Rome via Nile, Justinian
  • Pestis medievals = Black Death, epidemics until 1722
  • Pestis moderna = 1890-1930 in India, Hong Kong
    – Still endemic in American southwest, killing 6-8 / yr.
  • Cholera, Typhus, AIDS, Anthrax….
• 3 types
  – Bubonic (buboes, swelling, fever; by fleas; 30-50% survive)
  – Septicaemic (similar symptoms, 100% fatal)
  – Pneumonic (spread via air; fatality varies)

How did plague spread?

• Oriental rat flea (Xenopsylla cheopis) sucks up and regurgitates blood from host (humans, rats).
• Fleas can jump 150 times their own length (1/10 inch), and survive for a year in warm places.
Effects of Plague

Buboes – swollen lymph glands, esp. in neck, armpit, groin.

Responding to the Black Death

St. Roch (San Rocco)

St. Sebastian

Flagellants

• Seeking to purify themselves from God's wrath
• Bloody processions through town ctrs.
• Also seeking to find others who have sinned (esp. Jews)
Were doctors effective at combatting plague?

- Incense, talismans, charms, even loud noises (bells, cannon fire)
- Quarantine and isolation
- Clement VI @ Avignon sat between 2 large fires
- Sam Cohn in AHR…

Sources on Black Death

- Ring a-round the rosy
  Pocket full of posies
  Ashes, ashes!
  We all fall down!
  > English nursery rhyme

- "Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys, sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured."
  > Giovanni Boccaccio (1350s)

Consequences of Black Death

- Demographic changes
- New (attitude toward) wealth
- Public health
- Intense religiosity (e.g., flagellation) & disbelief in traditional religious methods
- Increased anti-Semitism
- More land, more wealth per capita, labor is worth more as farmer/soldier/artist
The “Danse Macabre”

Significance of 14th century

- An age of transformation
  - Traditional patterns of work, belief, social order all come under attack
- (Re)discovery of other cultures
  - Greek, Roman, Islamic, Aztec
- Roman Catholic Church monopoly questioned
- Individualism very slowly emerging
- Decline of knight & chivalry

World Distribution of Plague, 1998

- Countries reported plague, 1570-1998.
- Regions where plague occurs in animals.