



The Black Death and the Transformation of the West

By David Herlihy

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In this small book David Herlihy makes subtle and subversive inquiries that challenge historical thinking about the Black Death. Looking beyond the view of the plague as unmitigated catastrophe, Herlihy finds evidence for its role in the advent of new population controls, the establishment of universities, the spread of Christianity, the dissemination of vernacular cultures, and even the rise of nationalism. This book, which displays a distinguished scholar's masterly synthesis of diverse materials, reveals that the Black Death can be considered the cornerstone of the transformation of Europe.

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The Black Death and the Transformation of the West By David Herlihy Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #455647 in Books
- Published on: 1997-09-28
- Released on: 1997-08-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.12" h x .36" w x 5.72" l, .28 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 128 pages



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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

This work is a collection of three previously unpublished lectures by the late historian Herlihy (Medieval Households, 1985). The essays redefine the historical study of the Black Death: the first examines the basic assumption that the pandemic was an outbreak of bubonic plague, the second looks at its demographic and economic consequences to medieval Europe, and the third explains the cultural changes the plague wrought. Herlihy's contention is that we can learn from this "devastating natural disaster"; for example, parallels can be drawn to today's pandemic of AIDS, especially in the resultant bigotries that both engendered. Cohn (Univ. of Glasgow) introduces the lectures, admirably setting the scene. This book, which opens a new chapter on the history and implications of the plague, is essential for all readers of medieval history. *?John J. Doherty, Montana State Univ., Bozeman*

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From Kirkus Reviews

Bold, novel theories, sure to be controversial, about the medieval pandemic known as the Black Death, by late Brown University historian Herlihy. The European pestilence (dubbed the Black Death centuries later by northern European scholars) began in 1348 and ravaged the continent in intermittent waves for a century. In that time it killed millions; Herlihy estimates that in villages as far apart as England and Italy populations were reduced by as much as 70 or 80 percent. It is regarded as one of European history's watershed events. While not disputing that, Herlihy revisits much of the conventional wisdom about the demographic, cultural, and even medical impact of the plague. Indeed, he questions whether the Black Death even was plague: He notes that medieval chroniclers did not mention epizootics (mass deaths of rats or other rodents, which are a necessary precursor to plague) and did mention lenticulae or pustules or boils over the victims' bodies, which is not characteristic of plague. Herlihy observes that the illness showed some signs of bubonic plague, some of anthrax, and some of tuberculosis, and speculates that perhaps several diseases "sometimes worked together synergistically to produce the staggering mortalities." Herlihy sees Europe before the Black Death as engaged in a "Malthusian deadlock" in which a stable population devoted most of its energy to production of food and subsistence goods. The precipitous population decline occasioned by the Black Death compelled Europe to devise labor-saving technologies that transformed the economy. In more controversial theories, Herlihy argues from the increased use of Christian given names that the Black Death caused the Christianization of what had formerly been a pagan society with a Christian veneer, and contends that in the wake of the pestilence Europeans turned to preventive measures such as birth control to check explosive population growth. A stimulating discussion of some rarely considered aspects of one of history's turning points. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

Herlihy proposed that the Black Death led to "the transformation of the West" and shaped crucial aspects of modern thinking and behavior. Briefly and lucidly, Herlihy argued that Europe was...locked into Malthusian stasis, with a population unable to improve its standard of living and possessed of a set of unchanging and stagnating institutions. The Black Death was to shake Europe out of its immobile lethargy and to initiate processes of renewal...Samuel Cohn's succinct introduction provides an excellent commentary on Herlihy's theses. (Andrew Wear *Times Literary Supplement*)

Focusing on the Black Death which reduced the population in some European cities by 80 percent, Herlihy draws some powerful parallels between the plague and AIDS...His argument is a provocative one which will

lead other historians to re-examine not only the period of the Black Death but the foundations of medieval and modern medicine. (Lara Marks *History Today*)

The essays offer a number of fresh perspectives on the Black Death, the series of plagues that ravaged Europe after 1347. (*History*)

[These] essays redefine the historical study of the Black Death...Herlihy's contention is that we can learn from this 'devastating natural disaster'; for example, parallels can be drawn to today's pandemic of AIDS, especially in the resultant bigotries that both engendered...This book, which opens a new chapter on the history and implications of the plague, is essential for all readers of medieval history. (*Library Journal*)

Herlihy died in 1991, leaving these 1985 lectures among his unpublished papers. In them, he raises questions about the impact of the black death on everyday society, agrarian practices, the use of inventions, travel, and medical theory and practice. Because of their provocative ideas and new ways of looking at older assumptions, they are highly worthy of publication. (William Beatty *Booklist*)

Bold, novel theories, sure to be controversial, about the medieval pandemic known as the Black Death...Herlihy revisits much of the conventional wisdom about the demographic, cultural, and even medical impact of the plague...A stimulating discussion of some rarely considered aspects of one of history's turning points. (*Kirkus Reviews*)

[A] fine addition to thinking on the [Black Death] and an example of how good historical thought evolves. (*Publishers Weekly*)

The articles in this collection surprisingly are as fresh today as when they were delivered. David Herlihy utilizes new approaches and new forms of evidence to raise intriguing suggestions concerning the economic, social, and cultural history of European civilization and the borderlines between medieval and modern Europe. Supplemented by Samuel K. Cohn's invaluable introduction, they will stimulate a wealth of new historical investigation. This work can be read with profit by undergraduates, graduate students, and professional historians. (William M. Bowsky, University of California, Davis, author of *A Medieval Italian Commune*)

Living in the age of AIDS, Ebola fever, and the prospect of new, lethal diseases, we can surely benefit from the historical perspective David Herlihy provides in this wonderful book on the plague of 1348. Herlihy raises important questions about the exact nature of the disease, and how the economy and society of medieval Europe responded to unprecedented catastrophe. How do people explain the origin and course of a new disease? How do people react when the established institutions of church, state, and science fail to offer acceptable explanations for the occurrence of extraordinary levels of mortality? Herlihy answers these questions and offers fresh insights on an old killer that have a timely meaning for the modern world. Cohn provides a wise, contextual introduction and has skillfully edited these essays, making available once more to old friends and new readers the distinctive style and thoughts of David Herlihy. (Steven Epstein, University of Colorado at Boulder, author of *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe*)

The work of a mature, indeed brilliant, scholar. This is a succinct, lucid, provocative, and very learned treatment of the Black Death in its causes and consequences. (Thomas Kuehn, author of *Law, Family, and Women*)

Users Review

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