DAVID HERLIHY

The Black Death

and the Transformation of the West

Edited and with an Introduction by Samuel K. Cohn, Jr.

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Introduction

David Herlihy crossed a chronologically critical divide after completing his book on medieval Pisa[1] and a series of essays on the agricultural history of the early and central Middle Ages.[2] In the early 1960s he embarked on an investigation of the social and economic history of late medieval and Renaissance Europe, taking the Black Death of 1348 and its aftermath as the center of his analysis. This new focus characterized the bulk of his historical forays for the rest of his life. No matter what the subject—the history of popular piety, the networks of political elites, the family, women, or technology—the Black Death of 1348 and its consequences were central to his interpretative frameworks. Hence we were fortunate to find in Herlihy's stacks of research notes, computer files, and essays three unpublished lectures delivered at the University of Maine in 1985. With characteristic lucidity and boldness, these essays establish more clearly than anywhere else in his writing Herlihy's belief in the critical importance of the Black Death for the development of Western Europe and the transition from medieval to modern "systems" of behavior.

The three essays are not simply recapitulations of previously stated positions or revisions of previous research. Instead, they show an engagement with new sources for interpreting the Black

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Death and a marked change of mind in Herlihy's conceptualization of the plague and its effects on medieval societies.[3]

The essays also, of course, follow the main lines of his thinking. Already in his first work on late medieval and Renaissance Italy he characterized the Black Death of 1348 as "the great watershed" in medieval demographic and economic history.[4] He had begun to chisel away at the Malthusian approach then current in the historiography of the plague in France and England as it had been set by the authoritative works of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and M. M. Postan.[5] Herlihy's analysis of Pistoia replaced mortality with fertility as the critical variable for understanding Europe's failure to recover from the plague for over a century after its outbreak: "The failure of the birth rate to respond to the stimulus of deaths, more even than deaths themselves, seems the root cause of the shocking population plunge of the fourteenth century."[6]

Nonetheless, in sharp contrast to the three texts of 1985, Herlihy's diagnosis of the plague circa 1965 was still enmeshed in the broad Malthusian framework set by historians of the early 1960s. In the early 1970s, moreover, the importance of Malthusian cycles had become more pronounced in his work. In a "spectral analysis" of burial and death records, Herlihy and his statistician colleagues drew a symbiotic relationship between cycles of fertility and mortality in which the peaks in mortality were driven by fertility:

> The cycle of death rates, we propose, is closely related to, and in some sense may be considered in delayed reciprocal movement with, the cycle of birth rates. The high mortalities of a major plague stimulated the formation of a large age cohort, relative to the older population, in the following years, and this cohort was also likely to prepare another plague outbreak some forty or more years later, when it was most actively reproducing.[7]

True, Herlihy had eloquently demonstrated the shortcomings of a Malthusian model that stressed only the "positive" checks

without any discussion of the "moral constraints," which Malthus emphasized in subsequent editions of *An Essay on the Principles of Population*.[8] By such a reckoning the plague should have struck much earlier—in Pistoia, even before the recurrence of famines in the early fourteenth century and possibly as early as the mid-thirteenth century. Moreover, a crude Malthusian model was inadequate for explaining the delay of European populations to recover their losses during the fifteenth century. Yet in Herlihy's work on Pistoia it was the social, political, and economic conditions—overpopulation, over-extended planting of wheat, burdensome taxes in the countryside heaped on those least able to pay, and poor living standards for the mass of the population—that formed the crucible from which pestilence, even if delayed, would emerge by the mid-fourteenth century to change the ecology of Europe.

In both his article of 1965 and his book on Pistoia Herlihy concluded his discussion of the plague by turning to the account of the contemporary chronicler of Florence, Giovanni Villani, himself struck down by the pestilence of 1348. In his last days Villani had asked whether the disasters of his day should be attributed to factors beyond human responsibility—blind chance or the forces set in motion by celestial conjunctions—or whether they were to be interpreted as divine retribution for the present-day sins of the Florentines—"avarice, greed and usurious oppression of the poor."[9] Like Villani, Herlihy in the 1960s chose the second explanation, which he rendered into modern terms as man-made social factors to explain the plague's devastation of Europe.[10]

By 1985 Herlihy had changed his mind. Had he chosen to return to Villani's interpretive dilemma, he would have picked the first of the Florentine chronicler's explanations. For Herlihy's analysis, the plague now had little if anything to do with social forces. He had moved away from his modified Malthusian frame-

work of the 1960s, in which his stress on the role of class and exploitation of the countryside might even be seen as an unstated Marxist perspective (though Herlihy would have denied this interpretation). By the 1980s he no longer saw late medieval society headed inexorably towards a Malthusian disaster; instead, he saw it locked in a "stalemate" or "deadlock." The plague was not historically necessary, and without it Europe may have well persisted with remarkably stable institutions and systems of behavior for millennia. By his later interpretation, the Black Death had become an external factor independent of the social, political, or even the demographic environment. Once it had struck, however, it set Europe on a new path almost totally unrelated to its late medieval social past.[11]

Why had Herlihy changed his mind? Part of the explanation might be traced to a conference of 1983, during which the Italian demographer Massimo Livi-Bacci, among others, had argued vigorously against any causal link between malnutrition and plague or, for that matter, between malnutrition and many other epidemic diseases. Indeed, it would appear that malnutrition often served as a prophylactic against disease.[12] In addition, as Herlihy's first essay attests, he was swayed by Bruce Campbell's study of the Norfolk village of Coltishall, in which Campbell argued that even the famines of 1314–1317 did not alter the "demographic status quo," that the plague "was the result not of economic but of biological factors," and that it was "an exogamous variable."[13]

But what was even more crucial to Herlihy's change of mind in interpreting the distant past was the emergence in our own times of the pestilence we have called AIDS. Indeed, Herlihy opens these essays on the Black Death by pointing to the cholera epidemic of the 1820s as the stimulus for modern historiographical interest in the late medieval plagues. He further claims that society's preoccupation with our own current pestilence similarly has stimulated a renewed interest in the Black Death.[14]

But the rapid dissemination of AIDS, unlike that of typhus,[15] cholera,[16] or tuberculosis later in the nineteenth century,[17] cannot be pinned on social conditions that may have arisen from urbanization, industrialization, or inequalities in class structure. The origins of AIDS, as with the plague of 1348, remain more mysterious. AIDS too appears to have arisen ex-nihilo and—despite the propaganda of religious and homophobic commentators—looks to us, as the plague of 1348 did to the people of medieval Europe, like an inexplicable and horrific exogamous calamity.[18]

While the etiology and spread of syphilis in the sixteenth century would certainly make a better historical parallel to the present AIDS epidemic than does the Black Death,[19] Herlihy draws parallels from the Black Death experience of the later Middle Ages to our present-day predicament. These parallels lie largely in the history of attitudes. Perhaps stemming from the utter mystery of these two epidemics in contrast to syphilis in the sixteenth, cholera in the nineteenth, and tuberculosis in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries[20]—all highly contagious diseases—AIDS and the Black Death heightened popular distrust of expert opinion, particularly of the medical profession,[21]and have led more forcefully to suspicions, fears, and hatreds of the alien.[22] In the fourteenth century the plague gave rise to the spread of anti-Semitism—the rumor and persecution of Jews as poisoners of wells[23]; today it has reinvigorated fears and hatred of homosexuals and the poor. These suggestions surely invite some closer comparative studies of the outbreak of new diseases through modern history, all of which to a greater or lesser extent have sought out scapegoats for blame and had beginnings that were clouded in mystery in both the medical and lay communities.[24]

Finally, the AIDS epidemic may well have inspired Herlihy's skepticism about the methods commonly used since the late nineteenth century of analyzing the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century plagues. The rapid mutations of viruses and the appearance of

new ones without any known historical precedents should cause us to be wary of any match between diseases of the past and those that have been clinically described since the end of the nineteenth century. While bacteriologists and zoologists have recently questioned whether the bubonic plague was the only or even the principal disease in 1348 and in subsequent strikes of high mortality during the later Middle Ages,[25] the attempt to match medieval plague descriptions with modern diseases may be wrongheaded, even if the reports of medieval chroniclers and physicians can be trusted and deciphered in clinical terms. Modern medicine and the rapid dissemination of AIDS have taught the layman that new diseases can emerge in history without precise precedents, and that, perhaps as mysteriously as they appeared, they can vanish from the pool of infectious diseases. Thus medieval chronicles and doctors may not have been so blind or foolish in failing to discover the rat-flea nexus as twentieth-century historians have often assumed. As Herlihy concludes from what contemporary chroniclers, story-tellers, and doctors said, as well as from what they did not report, this failure to notice the rat-flea relation of *Yersinia pestis* may be justified by the simple fact that the connection did not exist.[26]

In these essays, as in Herlihy's historical writing more generally, the reader will find no trace of any lackluster recounting of the old historical debates. Instead, the author engages afresh with new sources as he continues to depend on the old ones in formulating new ideas. Like a finely tuned detective story, the first chapter marshals evidence to claim that the Black Death of 1348 was most likely not the bubonic plague assumed by historians since the late nineteenth century.[27] Instead, Herlihy takes seriously the thesis of the zoologist Graham Twigg, largely ignored or dismissed as nonhistorical by the rest of the historical profession, who has shown that the plagues in late medieval Britain

could not possibly have been either pneumonic or bubonic.[28] While not completely agreeing with Twigg's solution—that the epidemic of 1348–49 was the spread of anthrax—Herlihy expands Twigg's argument against the bubonic plague in Great Britain to Europe more generally, emphasizing the complete absence of any contemporary evidence of a preceding epizootic among rodents.

Ingeniously, Herlihy reaches for another source of evidence heretofore untapped by the historians of epidemics—the acts and processes for conferring sainthood, later collected in abbreviated form in the *Acta Sanctorum*. From these, he discovers that the late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century laity sought out new spiritual patrons for protection against the plague, reaching back to obscure figures such as the thirteenth-century Rose of Viterbo, about whom stories of miracle cures for the later pestilence were invented. In these accounts, similar to the descriptions by the most authoritative doctor of the period, Guy de Chauliac, Pope Clement VI's physician at Avignon, Herlihy finds that the buboes characteristic of (though not unique to) the bubonic plague were not the thing commonly described as "the sign" of plague; instead, these sources refer to *lenticulae* or freckles, which were more common to a number of other diseases including anthrax.[29]

The subsequent two chapters turn to the consequences of the plague for European civilization writ large: first, the demographic and economic consequences; second, those for the history of cultural attitudes. Again, Herlihy emphasizes that the decisive transition in the late fourteenth century from medieval to modern "systems of behavior" was not inevitable but depended directly on that most grand and horrific of external variables, the Black Death of 1348 and subsequent strikes of the disease against European populations through the early fifteenth century. From these, Herlihy creates two models of change: one regards the economic "system," the other, the demographic. In the economic sphere,

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Herlihy sees in the Black Death the mother of technological advance as societies strove to create labor-saving devices in the wake of population depletion. In the demographic system, he finds a shift in population control from "positive checks," such as disease, war, and famine, to a post-plague demography controlled principally by "preventive checks," that is, controls that stemmed from changes in inheritance practices, ages at marriage, and even birth control. Taking the place of strikes of high mortality, these "preventive" checks would come to distinguish Britain by the seventeenth century,[30] and perhaps also other areas of Europe yet to be systematically studied through the early modern period.

The final chapter turns to culture. Eschewing the debates founded on such classic works as Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*,[31] Millard Meiss's *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*,[32] Alberto Tenenti's *Il senso della morte*,[33] and Philippe Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death*,[34] Herlihy turns to a new type of evidence, the rise in the frequency of Christian first names given to newborns, to propose an intriguing hypothesis: the plague's role in the spread of Christianity as a part of popular culture. Moreover, he gives new clarity and force to older themes such as the role of plague in the dissemination of vernacular cultures and the rise of proto-nationalist urges; he does not simply enumerate these as effects of the plague by virtue of coming afterwards.[35]

Herlihy's novel and bold conceptualizations will inspire students and professional historians alike to rethink the plague along his broad lines of interpretation: to refine or perhaps even to refute altogether some of his sweeping generalizations. In regard to the post-plague demographic system in which families limited the number of offspring to achieve or maintain greater prosperity, an additional idea is suggested by his argument: with the Black Death and its tragic onslaught, which by many accounts struck down a

disproportionate number of the young, a new, more cherishing view of children arose during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As with many of the plague's reactions, its long- and short-term consequences were often mirror opposites of one another. In the face of the 1348 unprecedented disaster, fathers and mothers may well have abandoned their children, as one contemporary chronicler or story-teller after another reported and repeated. "Oh father, why have you abandoned me? . . . Mother, where have you gone?" were among the laments recorded by the 1348 chronicler from Piacenza, Gabrielle de' Mussis.[36] Boccaccio ended his lament over relatives abandoning one another by reporting that "what is hardly believable, fathers and mothers [abandoned] their children as though they were not their own, disgusted by seeing or assisting them."[37] Yet by the time of the later onslaughts of pestilence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, familial sentiments had radically shifted. Here, the complaints of the post-plague William Langland might be compared with those of the pre-plague Sienese poet Cecco Angiolieri. Disinherited from his worldly possessions because of the selfish pietistic zeal of his parents, Cecco penned his famous ode of familial hatred:

> If I were death I would go to my father;
> If I were life I would flee from him;
> And I would do the same for my mother.[38]

In contrast, a century later, Langland criticized parents of the merchant classes for spoiling their children, and suggested that the plague and rampant mortality may have been the cause of their parental overindulgence:

> Don't let wealth spoil them while they are young
> Nor for fear of the pestilence indulge them beyond reason.[39]

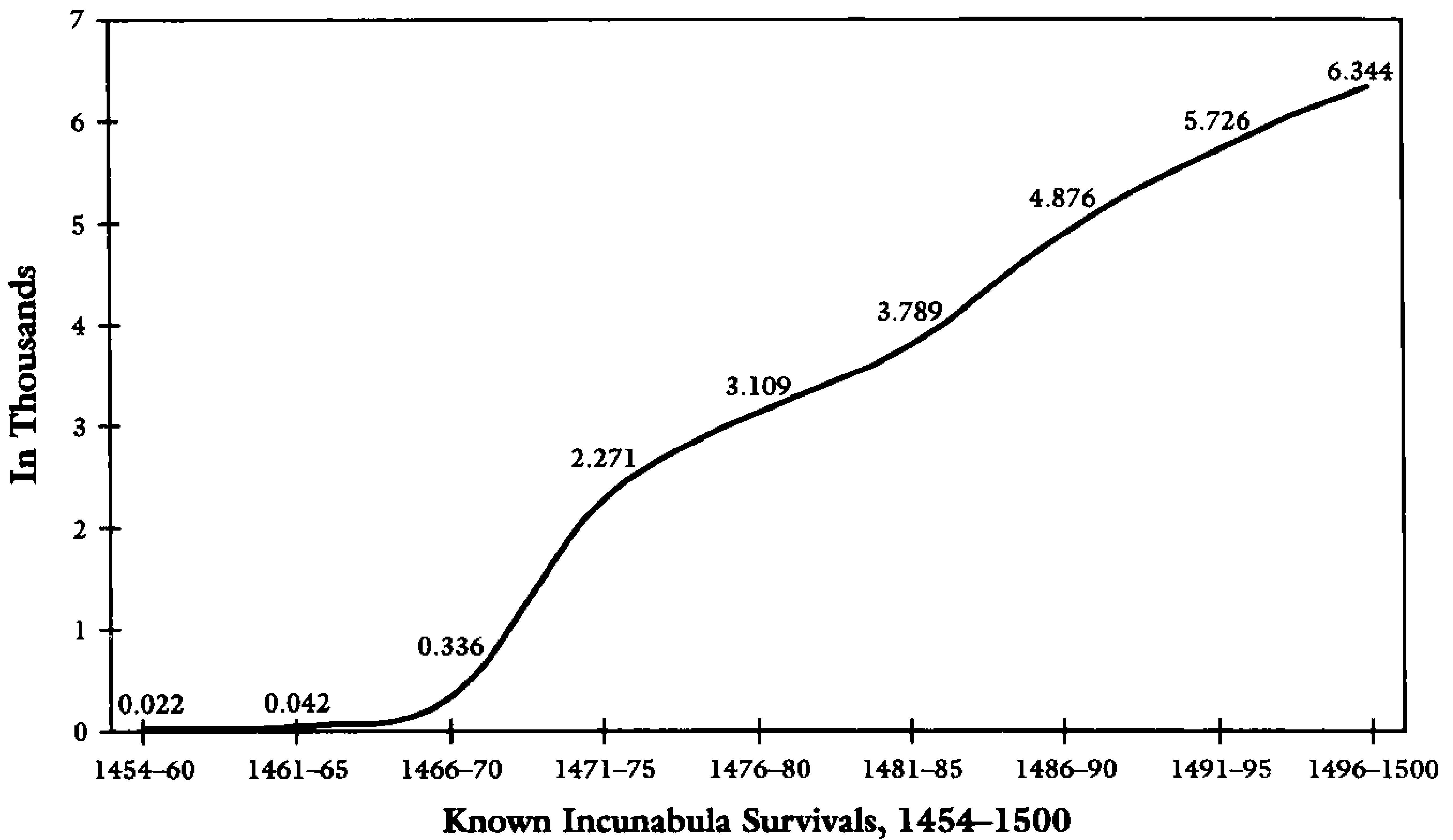
Beyond these literary impressions, the historian might turn to a more systematic source—last wills and testaments—which at

least for central and northern Italy included large swathes of rural and urban populations as early as the last decades of the thirteenth century.[40] In samples from Tuscany and Umbria, testaments show a steady progression in the importance of children. Men and women alike whittled down long lists of itemized gifts for numerous pious as well as nonpious causes to concentrate their attention on their surviving offspring as the universal heirs, spelling out with increasing detail the terms of these final allocations. By the early sixteenth century, the bulk of last wills and testaments in central and northern Italy came to focus on surviving sons. In near-religious terms, the children (usually but not always the sons) were seen as the conduits and repositories for the continuation and preservation of familial blood lines, which came to mark a new sense of earthly immortality.[41]

As well as provoking ideas in sympathy with Herlihy's broad lines of argument, these essays will no doubt invite modifications and objections. Did the Black Death mark a fundamental change in medical theory, leading toward a new theory of contagion? Was the Black Death the central turning point in the history of technology in Western Europe? Did the Black Death and its onslaught on European populations in fact spur new labor-saving technology? In arguing that the plague set off a new wave of technological ingenuity that would lead inexorably to the Industrial Revolution, Herlihy points to labor-saving devices invented after the Black Death of 1348. One of the most provocative of his examples is Johann Gutenberg's printing press, invented in 1453. This, he suggests, came to replace the large teams of monastic copyists who, because of their cloistered life, may have been cut down more severely than the general population by the plague. But if the historian looks more closely at the period of the diffusion of this new technology instead of its date of invention, a different relationship between technology and population emerges. Although the printing press had been invented during

the trough of European population in the mid-fifteenth century, the "takeoff" in the printing industry as marked by surviving publications *(incunabula)* did not occur until the 1470s—that is, when the population of Europe was no longer falling or even stagnant but was once again surging forward (see figure below). Moreover, the most important centers of printing—Venice, Rome, and the southern German cities and principalities—were not places of lagging population growth but instead were experiencing the fastest demographic growth in all of Europe.[42]

Nor was the immediate post-plague period or even the fifteenth century particularly noted for technological advances in other sectors. For wool and silk manufacture, the major breakthroughs (before the Industrial Revolution) came earlier, indeed during the period of surplus labor in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries.[43] The same might be said of agriculture.[44] While the agricultural depression of the fifteenth century may have led to some labor-saving devices such as a light one-stilt



Known Incunabula Survivals, 1454–1500

plough, other agricultural practices—the expansion of complex field systems, the extensive planting of vetches, the Hainault scythe—had clearly antedated the plague, spreading through large parts of Europe in the early fourteenth century.[45] The diffusion of other technological innovations such as windmills, which the Crusaders brought to the West in the twelfth century, depended not on labor scarcity but on the great expansion of wheat production spawned by European demographic expansion of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[46] For Norfolk, Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton have recently argued that before the agricultural revolution of the mid-eighteenth century, "all the technological innovations that brought it about can be found as far back as the thirteenth century." In their survey of six centuries of yield ratios, the Black Death and its aftermath were absolutely of no consequence to broad changes in Norfolk agriculture.[47]

Finally, despite the upsurge in warfare in France and Italy during the second half of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the plague did not mark widespread innovations in military technology. While the invention of the canon and gunpowder came earlier, in the thirteenth century,[48] the so-called Military Revolution came later, in the sixteenth century, and at a time of population increase and even overpopulation.[49]

Second, Herlihy's provocative analysis of Christian names as marking the spread of Christianity through the unlearned layers of Western society is also questionable, as indeed he later realized in one of his last publications.[50] While the absence of saints' names such as Giovanni, Antonio, Niccolò, and Francesco in the *Libro di Montaperti* (1260) is striking in comparison to their later predominance in the Florentine monastic necrologies of the fifteenth century and the Catasto of 1427, a closer look at the chronology of naming practices does not show the Black Death of 1348 as the watershed. As Charles Marie de la Roncière has shown, the change in the choice of names came earlier, with

the spread of mendicant preaching through the countryside during the first half of the fourteenth century.[51] Indeed, the Black Death of 1348, at least in the short run, had the very opposite effect. The rural populations of the Florentine *contado* recoiled against the popular naming practices of the past several generations; instead of increasing, mendicant saints' names such as Francesco declined during the second half of the fourteenth century.[52]

Later, Herlihy even questioned whether the appearance of saints' names can be taken as evidence of Christianization, suggesting that they express instead psychological needs for protectors in the face of adversity. What exactly caused that adversity remains a mystery in Herlihy's account, since the change in naming practices came about fifty years before the advent of plague.[53] In his later essay, Herlihy stressed the reduction of the stock of personal names over his earlier emphasis on the change to saints' names. That, again, was a change that preceded the Black Death and that was spurred by a growth in both ecclesiastical and secular bureaucracies during the thirteenth century.[54]

Herlihy's sweeping analyses for Western Europe cry out for comparative investigations. Were the social, political, and psychological consequences of the Black Death as uniform throughout Western Europe as Herlihy's essays imply?[55] And how do we account for the sharp differences between eastern and western Europe in economic and social developments set off by the plague[56] or, even more profoundly, between the West and the Middle East, where the plague was as virulent if not more so than in the West?[57]

In the Moslem areas of the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, the plague appears to have set in motion a chain of reactions just opposite to that described by Herlihy and others for the West. As against the rapid dismemberment of regimes and scores of popular revolts in the West, Mamluk political control was unshaken

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