

Assignment feedback

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Module code: HPHI6002

*Student ID
number:*
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*Educational
support needs:*

Yes

Module title: Death, Dying and the Macabre in
the Late Middle Ages

Assignment title: How Significant were the effects of the Black Death on Medieval
Religion and Culture?

Assignment due date: 12/1/18

Assignment Number: 4
(i.e. 1,2,3)

Marker's signature:

Date:

Provisional.

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.

SELF-REFLECTION SHEET.

PLEASE COMPLETE BEFORE SUBMISSION AND ATTACH TO YOUR WORK

Date: 10/1/2018

Module: HPHI6002

Name: Rosie Nye

Guidance: You might consider the following elements:

- Argument: does it have one/ is it backed by sufficient evidence/ how lucid is it?
- Structure: how clear is it / is my essay easy to follow/ does it help my argument?
- Analysis: is more/less analytical than narrative/ does it address the question?
- Reading: was this sufficiently broad/ have I referenced properly?
- How might I improve my performance in future?

Strengths

Examined the effects of the Black Death on Medieval Religion and Culture.

Looked at alternative factors in any change that occurred.

Used a variety of sources.

Weaknesses:

There was a lot to write about so I was unable to cover every aspect of both religion and culture.

I found it difficult to find a variety of sources to cover the topic.

General Comments:

It was an interesting topic to research.

Please give a mark for your work: 2/2

(for eg: 1st = 70+: 2/1 = 69-60: 2/2 = 59-50: 3rd = 45-49: pass = 40-44: fail = 39-)

How significant were the effects of the Black Death on medieval religion and culture?

The Black Death, a combination of bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic plagues, devastated the Western World from 1347 to 1351 whilst killing twenty-five to fifty percent of Europe's population (Cantor 2001: 1). The progress of the Black Death can clearly be traced in the chronicles and the business documents such as the episcopal registers and municipal records (Coulton 1929: 8). Most historians assign to the Black Death, an important role in European history (Gottfried 1984: xiv). However, there are numerous academic debates on the effects of the plague on ecclesial and cultural aspects of medieval life (Lindley 1996: 125). Some scholars believe that the effects of the Black Death were short lived whilst other academics regard the Black Death as a major turning point in the transition from medieval to modern Europe (Gottfried 1984: xiv). This essay aims to address the effects which the Black Death had on medieval religion and culture whilst discussing the significance of the effects.

The initial impact of the Black Death was catastrophic, killing nearly half of the common population and forty percent of the clergy (Harper-Bill 1996: 79). The Black Death had enormous impacts on the religious beliefs and practises of the English people (Harper-Bill 1996: 79). Gasquet (1893) states that after the Black Death the whole ecclesiastical system was disorganised or indeed more than half ruined. By stating this, he is implying that the effects of the Black Death on medieval religion were significant enough to uproot an entire religious order. However, although for the following seventy years after the plague epidemic of the late 14th Century penitential exercises were frequently ordered by the English prelates in an effort to avert God's anger at the sins of the people (Coleman 1981), within three generations the Church had re-emerged as a reinvigorated body which places Gasquet's statement regarding the Church into doubt. A number of academics recognise that the plague did impact medieval religion, yet there were a number of other important developments in the history of the Church and popular religion in the 180 years before the Black Death and between the plague and the Protestant reformation. (Harper-Bill 1996: 80). As a result, it is difficult to ascribe any of these effects to the pestilence alone with confidence; bringing into question the significance of the effects of the Black Death (Du Boulay 1970). A number of religions were effected during the Black Death, not least the persecution of the Jews in the belief that they had instigated the plague (Cohn 2007). However, the following will focus on the impact on the Christian Church.

For almost every religious community the key issue was ensuring the numbers were kept up (Platt 1996: 79). The larger and more fashionable orders, such as the Carthusians and the Bridgettines, still managed to recruit successfully. However, in contrast to the bigger orders, the perils of the smaller and the poorer communities were real. A number of lesser houses in post-plague England felt the effects of the Black Death very strongly including Selborne Priory and Creake Abbey (Platt 1996). Of all those who perished in the outbreak of the Black Death, the class which was affected the worst was that of the clergy (Platt 1996: 97). A detailed analysis of the registers owned by the Archbishops of York has revealed that surprisingly large numbers of clergy were ordained during and immediately after the Black Death (Harper-Bill 1996: 87). Annual numbers of those ordained substantially increased from 132 secular priests in 1344 to 1346 to 402 secular priests in 1349 to 1351 (Harper-Bill 1996: 87). It is clear from these figures that they are a result of the high clerical mortality from the Black Death (Raine 1873). In 1351 Archbishop Fitzralph of Armagh received papal permission to dispense forty illegitimate men and twenty sons of priests and men who had been married; all of whom would

normally be barred from being ordained (Williams 1962). Furthermore, Pope Clement VI also gave permission to the Archbishop of York in 1349 to increase the number of ordinations (Raine 1873). Although there is further documentation from medieval monasteries and nunneries also presents evidence to suggest that the Black Death had a significant impact on medieval Christianity, for example Snape (1926) presents figures which state that in seven monastic houses across England, the population dwindled by fifty-one percent, Harper-Bill suggests that the Black Death did not cause a crisis of faith nor did it deter men from entering the priesthood (1996: 89). This idea of keeping faith is also present in Boccaccio's "The Decameron" (Winwar 1955). According the Heath (1964), the York statistics indicate that individuals were not motivated to join the priesthood in order to calculate their own career opportunities. In contrast, personal salvation and spiritual service to a community in crisis is considered to have been the main incentive to enter the clerical order (Harper-Bill 1996: 89). Christianity as a whole seems to have been affected by the Black Death only slightly (Coulton 1929: 75); any significant impacts erased after three generations (Harper-Bill 1996).

However, the damage inflicted on the Christian clergy in terms of quality was far more substantial (Gottfried 1986: 83). The principle failure of the Church during the Black Death was, according to academics, not providing the necessary support during the crisis (Hamilton Thompson 1914). The most important failure, according to Hamilton Thompson (1911) was that the Church failed to provide spiritual comfort. The majority of parish priests fled the pestilence which resulted in a lack of services including the last rites (Cockerell 1916). Gottfried states that close to twenty percent of the parish priests in certain deaneries in York and Lincoln fled the Black Death (1986: 84). Zeigler states that "the plague not only depopulates and kills, it gnaws the moral stamina and frequently destroys it entirely..." (1972: 259). It is reasonable to suggest that this line is, at the very least extravagant in the way in which it describes the population experiencing the Black Death. In fact, the religious communities, such as Christians, were still strong in their faith (Gottfried 1984: 84). However, although faith had not been abandoned as such, many sought alternative paths to spiritual peace and salvation (Gottfried 1984: 84). One of the most famous alternative paths was that of the Flagellants (Horrox 1995: 150). As it can be seen in Figure 1, and as documented by the German Chroniclers the Flagellants would conduct processions through towns during the course of the Black Death, undergoing violent penitence through self-flagellation (Cohn 2007: 12). Although the intentions of the Flagellants were probably pure enough, a sincere desire to imitate the suffering of Christ in order to prevent the effects of the Black Death (Horrox 1995: 154), they soon began to

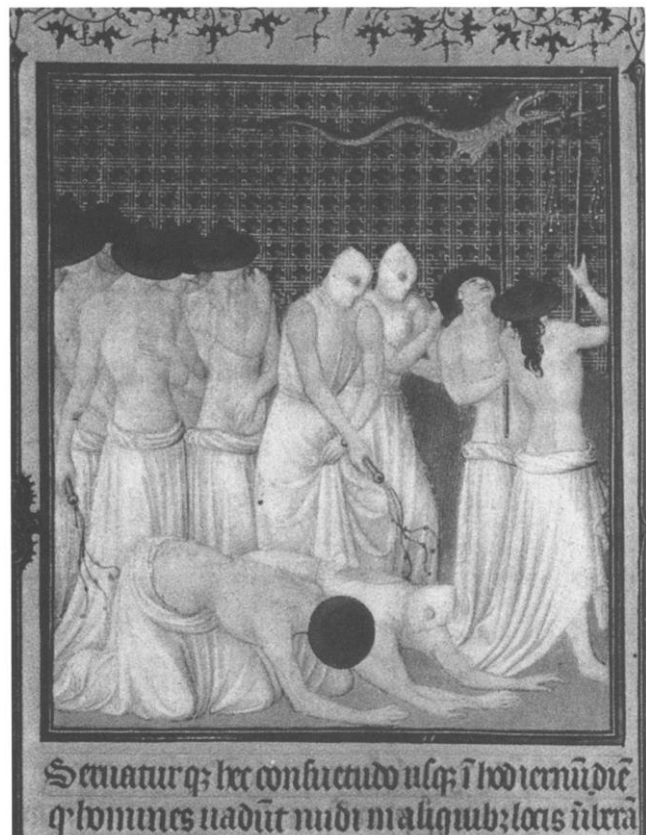


Fig 1. The Procession of the Flagellants from Belle Heures by the Limbourg Brothers for the Duke of Berry, c.1410. One of the four illustrations of Gregory the Great's Plague. In Cohn 2002: 704.

make extravagant claims for themselves; resulting in popular opinion not always in their favour (Deaux 1969: 183). However, it would be incorrect to state that the plague was the sole cause of the Flagellant movement. Deaux states that there is clear evidence from as early as the 11th Century that brotherhoods were present which devoted themselves to ritual flagellations with the processions originating in the 13th Century (1969: 184). Therefore, the origination of the Flagellants cannot be considered an effect of the Black Death. However, the growth in popularity of the movements and the sudden emphasis on the groups can be attributed to the plague. Although movement can be said to be one of the more prominent religious effects of the Black Death, according to Zeigler (1972: 86) the Flagellant movement did not amount to much. It would therefore be difficult to state that the movement of the Flagellants was of much significance after the Black Death.

Art historians have adopted many different techniques in order to discuss and explain the cause of what was seen as a profound shift in culture after the plague (Getz 1991: 285). Meiss argues that the post-plague period marked a period of crisis in medieval culture (Meiss 1951: 165). Meiss implies almost a Cold War between medievalism and modernism in post-plague art and literature (Meiss 1951) and both Meiss and other academics attribute the effects of the plague with the late medieval themes of the macabre (Getz 1991: 285). However, Polzer argues that the medieval obsession with death and decay preceded the effects of the Black Death. (Polzer 1982). The Triumph of Death Paintings in Campo Santo in Pisa (Figure 2, 3) is one example of the macabre in medieval artwork (Getz



Fig 2. The Appeal for Death (detail of the Triumph of Death) in Meiss 1965: 33.

1991: 285). The dramatic pose, as seen in Figure 3, is considered by virtually all scholars to reflect the plague of 1348 (Polzer 1982: 107). However, scholars place the fresco before the Black Death. What is most significant about the fresco is that the many texts and figures of the dead do not refer to the Black Death in any way (as can be seen in Fig 2). In the aftermath of the Black Death, representations of the plague did appear in art work including the 1348 Lychese

chronicle of Giovanni Seravambi (Figure 4, 5). This is one of a number of ritualized pictures of the plague. It is considered by art historians that the fresco seen in Figure 3, was the basis on which the Danse Macabre was designed (Meiss 1951). In recent years, it has been increasingly doubted if the Black Death really did have such a significant effect on medieval art that Meiss states it does (Lindley 1996: 131). The frescos used by Meiss to demonstrate the change in artwork brought on by the Black Death are viewed by others as antedating it (Polzer 1982). In contrast to Meiss's views, there is now a widespread belief amongst both art historians and medieval academics that the changes in the artwork of the time should be attributed to autonomous stylistic factors rather than historical impacts (Van Os 1981: 241) implying that the effects of the Black Death had little significance on the changes in the styles of medieval artwork.

The effects of the Black Death on culture have so far been discussed in relation to Italian artwork and the following will discuss the effect the Black Death had on English artwork. No surveys, in comparison to Meiss's, have been conducted on English art (Lindley 1996: 128). To Miller, the plague's impact was unequivocal in regards to manuscript painting (Miller 1928: 24, Figure 5). Miller blames the Black Death for "the most complete disappearance of materials when English illumination was at the highest point of its perfection" (Miller 1928: 24). As a result, he is under the assumption that there were no significant



Fig 3. The fresco of the Triumph of Death. In Polzer 1982: 108.



Fig 4. An illustration in the Lucchese chronicle of the apothecary Giovanni Sercambi. In Polzer 1986: 115.

manuscript illuminations painted from c1340 to c1360. What is even more interesting he suggests that the English manuscript illumination never recovered from, what he considers to be, a catastrophic collapse (Miller 1928: 24). Other aspects of art and culture, including monumental brasses and episcopal seals were also affected by the impacts of the Black Death. One of the most interesting being medieval architecture.

“The decrepitude of English art following the Black Death is one of the most dramatic incidents in the whole history of art” (Prior 1900). Prior’s very dramatic statement creates the impression that the Black Death caused significant change in medieval culture. Indeed, in his 1905 work, *“The Cathedral Builders in England”* Prior describes the four main effects on English architecture which includes the gradual secularization of the church buildings whilst also stating that the Black Death let “down the curtain on splendid and characteristic art...” (Prior 1905). Francis Bond (1905) agrees with Prior’s attitude towards of the Black Death’s effects, even if stated more brutally. “Unfinished work was everywhere stopped; and for a whole generation, little new work was begun” (Bond 1905: 136). According to Cox and Ford, there is a shift in religious architecture from the Decorated style to the Perpendicular style which became popular after the Black Death (Cox, Ford 1934: 95). Cox and Ford blame the Black Death for this shift, even going so far as to claim that the Black Death ended the



Fig 5. Le Palmer, Omne bonum. Illustration of what is suggested to be the plague. In Green et al 2015: 310.

Decorated style in churches (Cox, Ford 1934: 95). Writing in 1979, Professor Jean Bony agrees that the Black Death had a devastating effect on medieval architecture, especially in regards to the Perpendicular architectural style (Bony 1979: 61). From the information presented by the academics

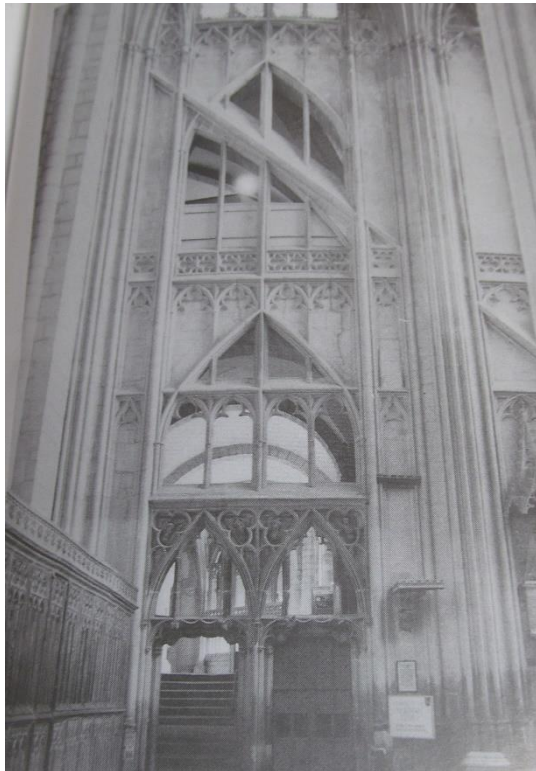


Fig 5. The south transept of Gloucester Cathedral showing the panelling effect which is characteristic of the Perpendicular architectural style. In Ormrod, Lindley 1996: 203.

previously mentioned, it suggests that the area in which the plague's effects were felt most significantly were that of culture especially medieval architecture. Indeed, Wilson suggests in 1990 that the Perpendicular style of architecture, which seems to have gained in popularity after the Black Death, was due to the populous welcoming a soberer and more spiritual style of architecture than that of the Decorated style (Wilson 1990: 212). However, there is a key obstacle to the linkage between the plague and the shift in architectural style in England (Lindley 1996: 133). Robert Willis' 1860 analysis of the South Transept at Gloucester Cathedral concluded that Gloucester Cathedral is the first building worked on in the new Perpendicular style (Figure 5); a theory now widely accepted by a number of medieval academics (Wilson 1990). What is more significant, is that the Perpendicular Style, which a number of medieval academics suggest was a result of the Black Death, predates the event of the plague (Lindley 1996: 133). The example of Gloucester Cathedral, for example, as mentioned before, is considered to be the first example of the new architectural style yet Lindley

states it was used before the Black Death ever had an impact (1996: 133). The style therefore, in origin at least, can be viewed as a purely autonomous stylistic development (Lindley 1996: 133); disagreeing with the theories suggest before. What is perhaps more significant is Joan Evans severely criticises the theories which suggested that the Black Death had any real effect on architecture (1949: 46). Evans refers back to the continuance of the Decorated style after the Black Death, especially in the East and North of England by citing the Carlisle East Window dating to 1363-82 as such an example of the older architectural style (Evans 1949: 46). As a result, Evans denies any important break or change in the architecture as an effect of the Black Death. Lindley acknowledges the difficulty in differentiating a specific cause from other contributing factors especially when the evidence is fragmentary and susceptible to a wide variety of different opinions (1996: 134). In a number of instances, as Evans has stated, the roots of change in the cultural styles that have been discussed, occurred before the Black Death's outbreak (1949). However, there are key examples which discount the idea that the effects of the Black Death had little or no significance on medieval culture.

What can be seen through the discussion of the effects of the Black Death on both medieval religion and culture is a contrast of academic opinions. In terms of medieval religion, there is certainly a crisis of confidence which stems as a result of the Black Death (Harper-Bill 1996: 122). However, any significant impact has disappeared over the next century. By the late fifteenth century, the recovery of the English Church was complete (Harper-Bill 1996: 122). Recent studies of religion after the Black

Death demonstrates that late-medieval religion was vibrant in faith and satisfying all levels of society (Duffy 1992). There was no longer a need for more fanatical groups such as the Flagellants. This essay shows that culture experience the more significant effects, most specifically in terms of architecture. However, in the English context at least, it is apparent that different aspects of medieval culture were affected in different ways. Miller's attitudes towards the effect that the Black Death had on medieval manuscript illuminations suggest that the effects were catastrophic and long lasting. Other aspects of culture, such as architecture, the effects were more complex and diffused over time (Lindley 1996: 146). In the long term, it is clear that the Black Death's effects on medieval religion and culture were not as significant as the effects of earlier or later events, such as the Reformation (Lindley 1996: 146). Yet, what is unequivocal is that the Black Death did have a dramatic and significant short term effect on both religion and culture in the Medieval World.

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