

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Copyright Regulations 1969

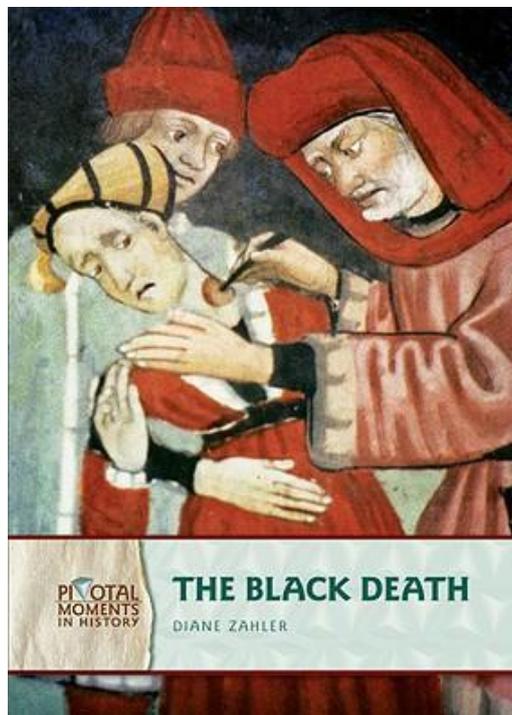
WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Zahler, D. (2009). *The Black Death*. Minneapolis, Minnesota : Twenty-First Century Books.



CHAPTER SEVEN

A NEW ERA BEGINS

Because a great part of the people, and especially of workmen and servants, late died of the pestilence, many seeing the necessity of masters, and great scarcity of servants, will not serve unless they may receive excessive wages.

—Edward III, Ordinance of Labourers, 1349

Most of medieval Europe had been rural. The farming economy was based on the medieval feudal system of peasant and overlord, with class divisions deep and obvious.

As the plague passed through towns and villages, it destroyed the feudal system on which much of the European economy was established. With from 30 to 60 percent of the peasants and serfs dead, there was a serious shortage of workers, both in the manor houses and in the fields. Those

landowners still alive desperately needed workers to plant and harvest, and to cook and serve. Before the plague, serfs had been forced to work for the lord of the manor, but afterward, they had the freedom to move to wherever workers were most needed and wages were highest.

PEASANT IN DEMAND

In Oxham, England, a plowman who made two shillings a year in 1347 made seven shillings in 1349 and ten shillings in 1351. Landlords lowered rents to attract workers. Landlords who couldn't find the employees to work their land and needed cash sold their land cheaply. Some peasants were able to buy land, and those peasants who already owned land increased their holdings. A new class of landowners grew up. Called yeomen in England, their place in the social order fell above the landless peasant and below the landed knight. They became a vital part of society.

In northern Italy, peasants refused to work on farms unless the landlords gave them a percentage of the crop. Peasants' incomes rose, while the incomes of the upper classes shrank, bringing the two groups closer together.

Skilled workers, too, were in great demand, and physicians, priests, and gravediggers, in particular, could ask for any payment they dared. The craft guilds had been devastated by the plague, and few skilled craftspeople were left alive to teach apprentices. Towns and cities, desperate for their services, offered carpenters, teachers, shoemakers, and metalworkers free housing and tax breaks.

PEASANTS VERSUS GOVERNMENT

Rising wages in England soon came to the notice of the king. In 1349 he issued an ordinance in an attempt to freeze wages to their pre-plague levels, stating that each worker should “take only the wages, livery [uniforms], meed [an earned reward], or salary, which were accustomed to be given the places where he oweth to serve, the twentieth year of our reign of England [1347].” The ordinance threatened that workers who charged too much would be “committed to the next gaol [jail].” Few officials were left alive to enforce the law, however, and wages continued to rise. In 1351 King Edward passed the Statute of Labourers, requiring workers to take an oath to charge only pre-plague fees for their services. By this time, it was possible to enforce the law to some extent, and some workers paid fines or received prison terms. In 1352, for example, seventy-five hundred people were fined in Essex County.

Growing peasant unrest because of these laws—and similar ones passed on the European continent—may have contributed to peasant revolts. Some were quite violent. The English Peasants’ Revolt began in Essex in 1381, when peasants, unhappy with low wages, found a reason to rebel when the government suddenly tripled a tax levied on them. The revolt spread quickly throughout southeast England. The rebels, led by a man named Wat Tyler, marched on London, attacking manor houses and monasteries, burning homes, and opening prisons. They reached the Tower of London, took the archbishop of Canterbury from his rooms there and, recognizing him as a figure of governmental power, executed him. Not long after, the king’s forces met Tyler’s, and Tyler was pulled from his horse and killed. The peasants quickly dispersed, and the king



In this painting from around 1470, the mayor of London (left) attacks Wat Tyler at the order of King Richard II (center). King Richard appears again (right), giving orders to his army.

later had the leaders of the rebellion hunted down and killed. Similar uprisings took place in France in 1358 and 1381, in Florence in 1378, and in Ghent, Belgium, in 1379.

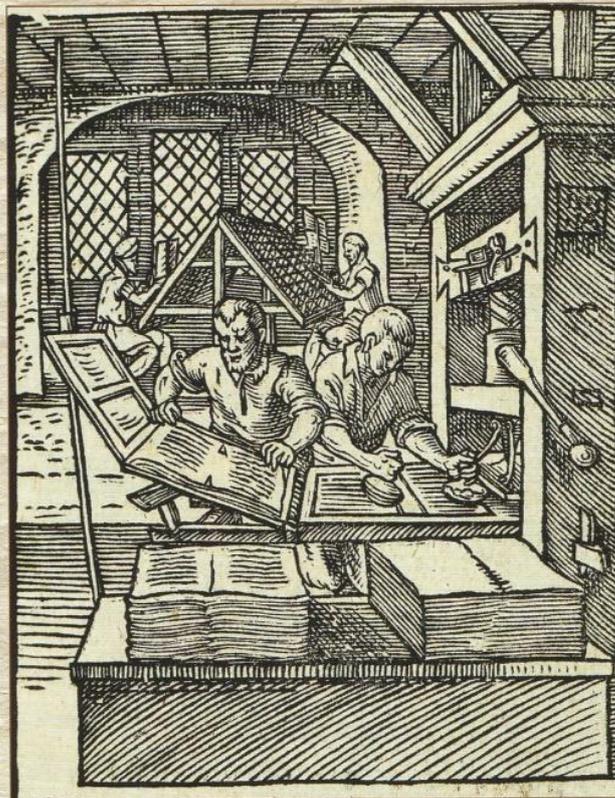
As wages rose, so did the prices of goods when tradespeople realized, because of greater demand, they could get more for their products. Wheat, meat, and cheese were more expensive all over Europe. Even so, workers earning more were able to afford more expensive food. People in general began to eat a more varied and healthier diet as the standard of living rose.

Fewer peasants available to cultivate farmland led to an increase in unused land. Many landlords, troubled by the rising price of farmwork, decided to convert their land to pasture and raise sheep. Especially in England, the very landscape of the countryside began to change. No longer surrounded by a patchwork of crops, villages were bordered by fenced-in meadow populated by herds of sheep. Sheep needed fewer workers to care for them, so towns and cities grew as the unemployed peasants moved to them in search of higher pay. Urban life began to take over what had previously been a mostly rural world. In northern Germany, for example, the large town of Lubeck had 422 new citizens in the year after the plague. Before the plague years, an average of only 175 moved there each year. In Luneberg the new citizens numbered 95, more than three times the pre-plague number.

Another effect of the labor shortage was the introduction of women into the workforce. Before the plague, peasant woman had labored in the fields and some women worked alongside their husbands in a family business. Afterward, women became metalworkers, clothworkers, and brewers. In fact, the brewing industry soon was run almost entirely by women. Women also ran the family shops that had once been the responsibility of their husbands and fathers. While women still had few rights under the laws of the land, they enjoyed greater personal power because they had more responsibility and more money.

Labor shortages required business owners to begin thinking in new ways. They had to find innovations that would allow them to produce goods with fewer workers. Dutch fishers, for example, developed a new way to use drift nets to catch

large quantities of fish, which they would salt, dry, and store. This enabled them to stay longer at sea and bring back more fish—a necessity with fewer fishers left alive. Many mills were converted from processing grain to sawing wood. One of the greatest and most influential innovations was the invention of the printing press in Germany. Books became available to the masses—if only they could read.



In this German woodcut from 1568, two men operate a printing press. In the back, two more men set type for the next pages.