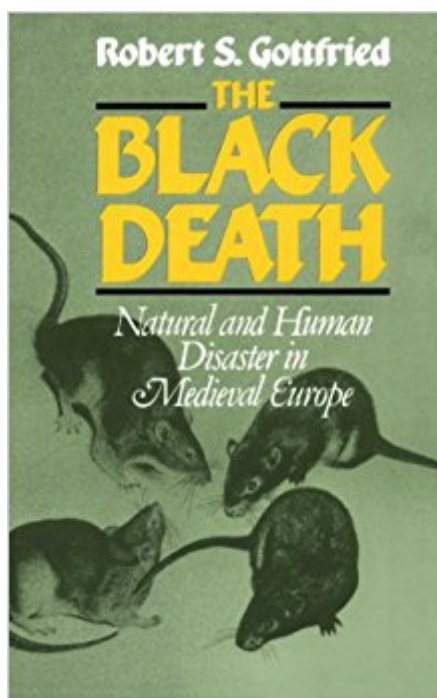


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# The Black Death: Natural And Human Disaster In Medieval Europe



## Synopsis

A fascinating work of detective history, *The Black Death* traces the causes and far-reaching consequences of this infamous outbreak of plague that spread across the continent of Europe from 1347 to 1351. Drawing on sources as diverse as monastic manuscripts and dendrochronological studies (which measure growth rings in trees), historian Robert S. Gottfried demonstrates how a bacillus transmitted by rat fleas brought on an ecological reign of terror—killing one European in three, wiping out entire villages and towns, and rocking the foundation of medieval society and civilization.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**New York Times Book Review** An engrossing study...Gottfried leaves us with a better understanding of how humans turned out to be at the mercy of changes in insect and rodent ecology. **The Atlantic Monthly** Intriguing [description of] the social and economic effects of the plague, particularly its impact on the medical profession...Professor Gottfried describes the process in brisk and stimulating style. **William H. McNeill New York Review of Books** Marks a distinct intellectual advance...a powerful reminder of how drastically ecological balances can be upset... **New England Journal of Medicine** The epidemiology of plague and its introduction into Europe, the details of its devastation of various regions, and the economic consequences of the pandemic...represents the scholarly

consensus and is well told. The Boston Globe Book Review Gottfried's own historical expertise serves him well in describing the broad tears, temporary patches, and eventual retailoring of the fabric of medieval life...Gottfried's examination of the Black Death can help us to understand ourselves as well as our darkest past.

Robert S. Gottfried is Professor of History and Director of Medieval Studies at Rutgers University. Among his other books is *Epidemic Disease in Fifteenth Century England*.

I read this as a dilettante in the field of medieval history. I found the volume engrossing and comprehensive. Gottfried explains in succinct detail the epidemiology of the black plague, the climatological, economic, and social conditions of the time, the nature and practice of medieval medicine, the effects the plague had on the Church and government. Other reviewers have mentioned Gottfried's talented presentation haunting or memorable anecdotes. I'm more impressed by his ability to identify long term changes in history and society engendered by the plague. To take just one example: "The traditional source of slaves for Italy was Circassia, many of whose inhabitants were light-skinned, light-eyed, and fair haired. Most of them were Muslim, which prompted the Christian Church to allow their enslavement under the theory that their masters would have the opportunity to convert them to the 'true' faith. But this boom was short-lived; like the rest of the Near East, Circassia was depopulated by the Black Death, leaving fewer people to be enslaved. The Datini records show that Italian merchants began to look to new areas, particularly Africa south of the Sahara Desert, an almost plague-free region from which Arab traders got their slaves. Thus, European interest in Africa was renewed and the black slave trade began." There you have it - the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade, all due to the plague. Gottfried illustrates the tremendous shifts effected by the Black Death in politics, medicine, religion, art, and economics with great scope and precision. Having approached the field with no substantial prior knowledge of medieval medicine, economics, or religion, I felt I was well-served by the author's comprehensiveness and readability. Despite this apparent effort to accommodate the layman Gottfried advances some complex and interesting hypotheses that muddy the traditional view of the Black Death's epidemiology and spread. The normally boring field of zoology is quite approachable in this text, too, which is an achievement I think the author should be proud of. The sheer, horrible reality of the thing is put on full display but discussed competently and with an ear for memorable details. If you have any interest in understanding what life would've been like during this fabular period you'd do well to read this book.

Gottfried's work is over 25 years old, so the scholarship is a bit dated - still, his is an excellent overview of the catastrophic epidemic of the 1340s. Gottfried begins with a discussion of ecology and the social and economic climate of Europe before the outbreak of the plague. While it is a bit dry (and may cause one to wonder how climate influences the bubonic plague), it is eventually worthwhile. The following chapters detail the spread and immediate effects of the plague - bubonic, pneumonic and septacemic. Gottfried really hits his stride, however, in discussing the impact of the epidemic. Of critical importance is his highlighting the fact that, were the epidemic of 1346 - 1349 only a singular event, the population of Europe and the immediate social, economic and political changes caused by it would have been inconsequential. (It is at this point that his earlier attention to climate and vector becomes important.) Instead, there were several subsequent outbreaks of the plague in the 14th and 15th centuries, creating a "Malthusian check" on population, allowing the myriad of changes that Europe was beginning in the early 14th century to really germinate and grow. The most significant of these changes, Gottfried argues, is the destruction of the tripartite system of the middle ages ("those who pray, those who fight, those who work"), replaced with a more centralized political system, a more diverse economy, a weakened church, and important changes in medicine. For a more detailed discussion of the plague (and reflecting more recent scholarship), I recommend *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (P.S.). For those interested in an accessible, well-written and excellent overview, this is my first choice.

I finished my first novel *Not Without Mercy: The Black Death*, in the middle of 2012. During my research about the Black Death I came across Mr. Gottfried's book, *The Black Death*. I found his writing to be clear, concise, and very well researched. I learned a great deal about the Plague and medieval Europe by reading his book. Although I used many other sources for my research, I found myself referring back to his book on many occasions. My novel is a historical fiction that tells the story of a family who survives the plague. It was extremely helpful to refer to Mr. Gottfried's book to fill in some of the blanks. I would highly recommend this book to any student of medieval Europe who wants to learn what really happened with the Black Plague. Excellent book, very well worth the read!!

A book full of statistics about the impact of Black Death on the European and Asian population. I guess too many numbers. I would have summarised perhaps on a few cities and that would give the

reader a good idea on the death toll. However, the origin of the disease is quite well explained. The economic impact is to me the greatest contribution of the book from the author viewpoint as well as the resulting social changes such as the opening of a new era in medicine (more research oriented) and the land property issues. A good book to read as an introduction to this catastrophe that brought in the middle ages. Other diseases are also included in the book and their impact. One can realise when reading about those maladies the advance of medicine today and how through research most of those diseases and new ones are controlled or in the process of disappearing.

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