

“There came a Privy Thief, Men Clepe Death”: A Tale of Two Plagues and of Altered Perspectives

By Ken Moore*¹

This article contrasts the 14th century Black Death (Bubonic Plague), particularly in England where its effects are well-attested, with the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic, in terms of similarities and (potential) consequences. The two pandemics, as the paper will argue, have much in common. They are also very different in terms of the death toll as well as, in particular, how modern technology and medical science have been able to deal with COVID-19 arguably much better than 14th century Europe was able to cope with the Black Death. Even so, both plagues have demonstrably impacted society and, in the case of the recent pandemic, we have yet to witness all of its effects. Some careful analysis will be made of the rather dramatic impact of the Black Death in England which, in particular, resulted in the decline of feudalism. I argue that this was the result of a changed perspective. Drawing on that example, this article considers how the current plague may also be changing perspectives in order to make some tentative, longer term predictions about our future.

Who can know the future? Historians undoubtedly cannot. However, with the privilege of extensive hindsight, we can observe certain parallels and trends from which broader predictions may be ventured. It is likely that events will not turn out precisely as predicted by such a method; but, the past can serve as a guide for the future, if only in a general sense. This article examines such parallels as may be observed between the multiple crises of the 14th Century and those of the present with special regard to the medieval pandemic, known as the Black Death, particularly in England. The article compares that with the more recent COVID-19 pandemic which still holds the world in its grip, albeit seemingly loosening, at the time of composition. This work asks a fairly straightforward question: are there parallels between these two eras and what can we learn from that earlier one which may allow tentative predictions about how the current situation might play out? The answer to that question is, in the broadest sense, a change of perspective and attitude among the survivors. In order to illustrate this point, the article will consider details and arguments about the Black Death and the changed attitude resulting from it, most notably the eventual demise of the feudal order in England, if not everywhere. Parallels will be drawn between those (contested) alterations of society at the time and those occurring now or which may yet come. Similarities and differences between the two pandemics will be noted and projections made where possible. A number of other crises transpiring

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1. Trans: “There came a subtle thief that men call Death”, from Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Pardoner’s Tale”, in the *Canterbury Tales*; see below for the full reference.

in close temporal proximity will also be explored. If these parallels hold true to any extent, then we may expect some interesting changes in our own future. Plagues in particular have traditionally been seen by historians as far back as Thucydides as resulting in profound "social and political consequences".² Whether these are deemed to be for better or for worse in the present age shall remain to be seen.

The medieval era under consideration here, through which this article finds parallels with the modern one, has been rightly called the 'Calamitous 14th Century'. And the Black Death was not the only factor in earning it such an endearing epithet. Europe experienced famine due to climate change, which was also a factor in the spread of the plague; there were two major schisms in the Catholic Church, brought about in no small part by the other pressures facing society at the time; and the Hundred Years War between England and France began. Economic and societal crises occurred that were related to these other factors. We shall range through these in order to compare their effects with their modern equivalents in the age of COVID-19. And yet it is compelling to note that, in the early 21st century, we are also faced with the devastating effects of climate change, religious anxieties (especially, but not exclusively, in places such as the U.S.A.) and scandals, plague, famine, economic crises and now also a war in Europe. The Russian invasion of Ukraine had not begun when the author of this article envisioned its theme; however, not unlike the Hundred Years War, it too is effectively a war of irredentism, entailing a dispute over regional hegemony between ethnically similar groups. And the parallels are more than a little striking. Before we approach that, however, let us consider some of the other issues in order.

Climate change, as any geologist or climatologist will tell us, is not a modern phenomenon. That instance of it which impacted northern Europe so extensively during the medieval period is often referred to as the 'Little Ice Age'. And this term has been employed widely by different authors as there seems actually to have been at least two cooling episodes: the earlier one, in which we are most interested, from the late 1200s to about 1600, and a later one in the 1700s and 1800s.³ During the earlier event, the Baltic Sea froze in 1303, 1306 and 1307, which had never before been recorded, and the Alpine glaciers advanced. The Norse settlements in Greenland were cut off and grain cultivation became untenable in Iceland. The last ship to set sail from Iceland to Greenland did so in the early 1400s; travel there would not be resumed until the 1700s, after those settlements had been long abandoned. Starvation, disease, raids by English pirates and

2. G. T. Papanikos, "Thucydides and the Synchronous Pandemic," *Athens Journal of History* 7, no. 1 (2021): 71.

3. M. Mann "Little Ice Age," in Michael C. MacCracken, and John S. Perry (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Change, Volume 1, The Earth System: Physical and Chemical Dimensions of Global Environmental Change* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

conflicts with natives have all been suggested as causes, and all probably played a role in the demise of those colonies; but none nearly so much as climate change.⁴ Elsewhere, crops failed in France after heavy rains in 1315; widespread famines, reports of cannibalism and epidemics followed. There was flooding in England and Wales and crop failures as marginal lands, which had been heavily cultivated during the population boom of the previous century, no longer yielded produce.⁵ Wet, rainy winters and cool summers became the norm.

Scientists have tentatively identified a number of likely causes of this climate change. They include shifting orbital cycles, decreasing solar activity, increasing volcanic activity, altered ocean current flows, the naturally inherent changeability of global climate as well as the impacts of reforestation following subsequent decreases in the human population and abandonment of marginal lands. That is to say, some consequences of the Little Ice Age may have actually exacerbated its effects with human activity being a factor, though less than perhaps today. A study found that an especially massive volcanic eruption in 1258 somewhere in the tropics, possibly of Mount Rinjani in Indonesia, may have caused the initial cooling. Three lesser eruptions followed in 1268, 1275 and 1284 that hindered the climate's ability to recover. The eruption of Kuwae in Vanuatu, 1452–1453, likely triggered the second, longer phase of cooling.⁶

From 1315 to 1322, a catastrophic food crisis known as the 'Great Famine' hit all of Northern Europe. It came about in many respects as a direct result of the hefty population growth in previous centuries coming into conflict with the climate change of the Little Ice Age, with Europe becoming overpopulated beyond what its agriculture could reasonably sustain in the early fourteenth century. With climate change being a concomitant factor, the number of people began to exceed the reduced productive capacity of the land.⁷ New technological innovations such as the heavy plough and the rotational, three-field system had facilitated the previous population boom; however, these methods were less effective in clearing new fields for harvest in Northern Europe as they were in the Mediterranean due to the north having poorer, clay-filled soil and also being affected more negatively due to climate change.⁸ So, marginal lands failed to yield in the altered climatic conditions. Food shortages had become increasingly common and prices were steadily rising for nearly a century prior to the coming

4. Ibid. See too: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Ice_Age.

5. E. L. R. Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: a History of Climate since the Year 1000* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

6. G. H. Miller, Áslaug Geirsdóttir, Yafang Zhong, Darren J. Larsen, Bette L. Otto-Bliesner, Marika M. Holland, et al. "Abrupt Onset of the Little Ice Age Triggered by Volcanism and Sustained by Sea-ice/Ocean Feedbacks," *Geophysical Research Letters* 39, no. 2 (2012): 1-5.

7. J. M. Bennett, and C. W. Hollister, *Medieval Europe: A Short History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 326.

8. Ibid.

plague. Such staples as wheat, oats, hay and, as a consequence, livestock that depended on them were all in short supply (issues also facing the world of 2022). Their scarcity naturally resulted in hunger and malnutrition. Large numbers of human beings were therefore more vulnerable to disease on account of the resulting weakening of their immune systems. The European economy entered a vicious circle in which hunger and chronic, low-level debilitating diseases reduced their already benighted productivity. The output of grain and staples suffered, which caused prices to increase. This situation was worsened when elite landowners and rulers, such as Edward I of England (r. 1272-1307) and Philip IV of France (r. 1285-1314), raised the fines and rents of their manorial tenants, probably out of the fear that their own higher standard of living would decline.⁹ Standards of living did fall considerably for most; diets became more limited and less healthy; and Europeans on the whole suffered a general increase in health problems. The looming pandemic would find easy pickings.

The Little Ice Age and the Great Famine had thus weakened Europe's agricultural productivity and made life increasingly difficult: whole villages were abandoned and, as indicated, people resorted to cannibalism in some particularly hard-hit localities.¹⁰ The stage was set for the next calamity: the Bubonic Plague, which was facilitated by these and other factors.¹¹ Its symptoms were described in 1348 by the poet Boccaccio who lived in Florence, Italy:

The first signs of the plague were lumps in the groin or armpits. After this, livid black spots appeared on the arms and thighs and other parts of the body. Few recovered. Almost all died within three days, usually without any fever.¹²

The rest of the passage will be omitted here for want of space; but it paints a bleak and horrific picture. The events leading to the plague may be observed chronologically and make the subject of many a scientific and historical study. In October of 1347, Genoese trading ships put into the harbour of Messina in Sicily with many dead and some dying men still at the oars. They had come from the Black Sea port of Caffa (now Feodosiya) in Crimea, which had been a Genoese trading post. The plague had come along the Silk Road from the east and infected the Genoese who, taking advantage of the premier travel-technologies at the time and the increasing of trade routes, distributed the bacterium to a much wider population than would have been possible in previous centuries. The ailing

9. Ibid, 327.

10. As, for example, observed at Wharram Percy in NE England. See S. Mays, R. Fryer, A. W. G. Pike, M. J. Cooper, and P. Marshall, "A Multidisciplinary Study of a Burnt and Mutilated Assemblage of Human Remains from a Deserted Mediaeval Village in England," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 16 (2017): 441-455.

11. B. Handwerk, "Little Ice Age Shrank Europeans, Sparked Wars Study Aims to Scientifically Link Climate Change to Societal Upheaval," *National Geographic News* 5 (2011).

12. G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (London: David Campbell, 1921), Vol. 1, 5-11.

sailors on that fateful voyage had strange black swellings about the size of an egg or apple in their armpits and groin. The swellings oozed blood and puss and were followed by spreading boils and black blotches on the skin, which was the result of internal bleeding. The infected suffered intense pain and died quickly, usually within five days of the first symptoms. As the disease spread, other symptoms began to emerge in victims such as a continuous fever and spitting of blood, instead of swellings or buboes. The victims coughed and sweated heavily, dying even more quickly, within three days or fewer, sometimes within twenty-four hours from infection. In both manifestations of the disease, everything that issued from the body (breath, sweat, blood from the buboes and lungs, bloody urine, and blood-blackened excrement) was described as having a foul odour. All of it helped to spread the infection through contact with healthy victims. Depression and despair accompanied the physical symptoms, and before the end, we are told, "death is seen seated on the face."¹³

This was arguably the deadliest pandemic in history. Since this article deals primarily with Europe, as has much of the scholarship on this topic, we perhaps miss the wider picture of a more universal pestilence; though it was certainly that. The disease is generally considered to have been *Yersinia pestis*, present in two forms: one that infected the bloodstream, causing the buboes and internal bleeding (hence "bubonic"), and was spread by contact; a second, more virulent (pneumonic) type was a respiratory infection spread through the air. The presence of both at once caused the high mortality rate and speed of contagion. The disease was so lethal that cases were reported of individuals going to bed well and dying before they awoke, of doctors catching the illness at the bedside of the sick they were attempting to treat and dying before the patient did. It spread so quickly between people that to a French physician, Simon de Covino, it seemed as if one sick person "could infect the whole world."¹⁴ The malignity and virulence of the pestilence appeared more terrible because its victims had no knowledge of how to either prevent it or to treat it. The Church maintained that the plague was sent by God to punish sin; although, they were never especially specific about what sins were being punished nor could they offer any remedy. And clergy themselves died in droves as they caught the plague often as a consequence of offering the last rites to its victims. Their ranks were so depleted that the pope issued a decree that, if no priests could be found, ordinary men and even women could render the last rites in these exceptional circumstances.¹⁵ This is an apt illustration of just how such a condition *in extremis* could result in the

13. Ibid.

14. See B. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 93.

15. D. Cybulskie, *Priests and the Black Death*.

violation of societal norms.¹⁶ It contrasts well with how, in the modern pandemic, harsh restrictions were imposed on visiting the sick and dying or on numbers of mourners allowed to attend funerals.

The first wave of the Black Death swept through Europe in 1347-1350, and there were six more waves between 1350 and 1400 as each new generation of potential victims, not immune to the plague, appeared. Will COVID-19, or some variant thereof, return with such force in our own future? This remains to be seen. However, in terms of the medieval plague, there are no accurate figures on the death rate, but it is reckoned that the population of Europe was likely cut in half by 1400. This is probably the closest approach to the effects of a thermonuclear war that human beings have experienced in the whole of recorded history. The recovery was slow but dramatic. Social changes and, as this article argues, changes in perception and attitude especially as a direct result of the Plague, but almost certainly on account of the compounded crises, led Western European society to take on a more "modern" appearance. By 1400, the worst of the pandemic had passed and society was on the mend. The term 'Renaissance' ('Rebirth') was first used in the late 14th century by Italian scholars who saw themselves as the vanguard of a period of improved conditions.¹⁷

The Middle English quote used in the title of this article comes from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale", in the *Canterbury Tales*, which illustrates the deadly sins of Gluttony and Greed through the characters of three drunken youths who decide to hunt down and kill Death himself who has slain one of their friends. Chaucer directly references the Black Death in this passage. Apart from a more oblique reference in the "Knight's Tale", this is the only such example in the *Canterbury Tales* which, being a rather glaring omission, perhaps suggests the degree of trepidation that contemporaries felt about this calamity and thus were reluctant to mention it any more than necessary. In the "Pardoner's Tale", first a boy in the tavern where the youths are drinking, and then the publican, both describe events as follows (rendered into modern English here):

"...And suddenly last night the man was slain,
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.
There came a privy thief, they call him Death
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.
And then Death went his way without a word.
He's killed a thousand in the present plague..."
The publican joined in with, "By St. Mary,
What the child says is right; you'd best be wary,

16. See Papanikos "Thucydides and the Synchronous Pandemic," 17 for comparable "social violations" in relation to burials during the ancient Athenian plague.

17. See P. Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

This very year he killed, in a large village,
 A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,
 Page in the household, children – all there were.
 Yes, I imagine he lives round there...¹⁸

Chaucer's allusions to the Black Death in the "Pardoner's Tale" would have been painfully familiar to his audience at the time. As indicated, there had been a steady population expansion in the century before the Black Death—at its height, the population in England and Wales was estimated to have been around 6 or 7 million. The Black Death is thought to have killed between 45% and 60% of the total.¹⁹

Around 3,000+ abandoned medieval villages have been identified, often either as a direct result of the plague or due to the collapse of marginal agriculture on account of the Little Ice Age, or both. Although many, such as Wharram Percy in North Yorkshire, while badly affected by plague and famine, were ultimately abandoned by the beginning of the 15th century due to their landlords eventually deciding that sheep farming was more profitable than the traditional, manorial system.²⁰ Perhaps this change would have happened more gradually were it not for the Black Death. But that is uncertain and, at best, speculative. Platt refers to the situation at the beginning of the 14th century as a "Malthusian" crisis largely brought about through overpopulation, though somewhat ignoring, as much 20th century scholarship has tended to do, the impacts of climate change.²¹ He, like many other scholars of this era, regarded the Black Death as some kind of "set-back" to a steadily developing progress; though it is unclear as to what that progress would have looked like were it not for the plague and other convergent calamities. While some contemporaries claimed that only "the dregs of society lived to tell the tale",²² the sheer loss of life resulting has been referred to, rather coolly, in modern scholarship as "more purgative than toxic".²³ Again the onus is here placed on the economic and social woes that were becoming apparent in the era of Edward I, at the beginning of the century, as being due more to

18. G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Penguin, 2003), 250-251.

19. S. Barry, and N. Gualde, "The Greatest Epidemic of History," in *L'Histoire* 310 (2006): 45-46, say "between one-third and two-thirds"; Robert Gottfried (1983). R.S. Gottfried, s.v. "Black Death," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 257-267, says "between 25 and 45 percent".

20. J. M. Eaton, *An Archaeological History of Britain: Continuity and Change from Prehistory to the Present* (London: Pen & Sword, 2014), 151.

21. C. Platt, *Medieval England: A Social History and Archaeology from Conquest to 1600 AD* (London and Henley: Routledge and Paul Kegan, 1978), 91 ff.

22. V. Pritchard, *English Medieval Graffiti* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 182-182.

23. A. R. Bridbury, "The Black Death," *The Economic History Review* 2nd series 26 (1973): 592.

overpopulation than anything else. Indeed, the loss of life was not insignificant, as we have seen. And while it was not the only factor in effecting the paradigm shift, the pandemic's impact should not be under-rated.

The plague also sparked a crisis in religion; although, it too had been building prior to this time. The church suffered heavy losses during the Black Death with the result that there were far fewer, well-educated and competent officials within it for some time afterwards.²⁴ Priests were ordained who were illiterate and boys were allowed to take holy orders as young as fifteen in a hasty attempt to fill vacant offices. The lack of piety and intellect among a large section of the clergy in consequence led to their being subject to criticism (termed 'ant clericalism', which is very much represented in Chaucer) and this probably also facilitated further, significant issues within the Church. Anticlericalism was implicitly not being critical of the Church itself or its doctrines, as the Lollards would be in the latter half of the century. It was aimed at specific individuals whose corruption became known. However it did serve to undermine faith in the wider institution and facilitated further criticism of the Church.

A crisis that began prior to the Black Death, but following hard on the heels of the Great Famine, was the so-called 'Great Schism'. This began with the Avignon Papacy, which refers to a period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church from 1309 to 1378, in which the seat of the Pope was relocated from Rome to Avignon, France. It has also been called the 'Babylonian Captivity' (or 'Babylonish Captivity') of the Popes (or the Church), particularly later in the criticisms of Martin Luther. This polemical term refers to the claim by critics that the excessive wealth of the church at this time was accompanied by a profound compromise of its spiritual integrity, especially in the alleged subordination of the powers of the Church to the ambitions of the Frankish monarchy. Coincidentally, the 'captivity' of the popes at Avignon lasted around the same duration as the biblical exile of the Jews in Babylon, making the analogy to that event both convenient and rhetorically potent.²⁵

In 1378, the papacy was restored to Rome, while a disputing party continued to honour the bishop in Avignon as the head of the Church. From 1378 to 1414 was a time of difficulty which Catholic scholars refer to as the 'Papal Schism' or, 'the great controversy of the antipopes' (also called the 'Second Great Schism' by some secular and Protestant historians), when parties within the Catholic Church, indeed whole nations, were divided in their allegiances over the various, 'phantom' popes.²⁶ During this thirty six year period, there were two and, at one point, three claimants to the office of the Vicar of Christ. The Council of

24. See M. H. Zentner, *The Black Death and its Impact on the Church and Popular Religion* (Oxford, Mississippi May 2015), *passim*.

25. G. Goyau, and Guillaume Mollat, "Avignon," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907).

26. *Ibid*.

Constance finally brought this embarrassing episode to an end with the agreed election of a single pope, Martin V, in 1417. These matters would fuel dissent among the followers of John Wycliff, known as the Lollards, who may be characterised as representative of a kind of 'proto-Reformation' movement. The arguments of the Lollards (e.g. limiting the power and wealth of the Church and questioning of transubstantiation, among others) would be picked up again with renewed vigour at the time of Martin Luther and the actual Reformation; although, the seeds were planted at the time of the 14th century crises.

It is not the intention of this article to dwell overmuch on these religious topics as they could be, and have been, the subject of multiple treatises devoted exclusively to them. However, there are several parallel points here worth noting. One is that, in the 14th century as now, the Catholic Church was shaken by controversy, albeit of a mostly different type. Sexual misconduct of significant numbers of clergy was indeed a target of medieval anticlericalism, and is frequently featured in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; though, it was neither the only complaint against them nor even the most significant one.²⁷ In the modern era, sexual misconduct, along with subsequent attempts to conceal that misconduct, apparently at the highest levels, feature more prominently in the present crises faced by the Catholic Church. The other rather striking parallel is that, then as now, there is more than one pope, albeit for different reasons. Granted, Benedict XVI is the "Pope Emeritus" (whatever that actually means), and Pope Francis is the official head of the Catholic Church and the sovereign of Vatican City State since 2013. There is no actual schism today; but there are still two popes and this has not been the case at any other time in history since that of the Papal Schism. But, ultimately, if we regard the medieval Church as a political institution, which it certainly was, the corruption and controversies at that time bear more than a passing resemblance to those of the present leadership of many western governments.

It must also be acknowledged that the present crises in the Church, along with the unusual presence of two popes, began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Great Schism (if not the Papal Schism) also began prior to the Black Death, and these were part of broader historical processes that would be nonetheless affected by the medieval pandemic. Even so, both the Black Death and the Great Schism, alongside other pressures on society, prompted some demonstrable advances in architectural design and technology, culminating in the Perpendicular Gothic style. In an interesting reversal of the earlier Romanesque styles of

27. See, for example, "The Shipman's Tale" (involving a randy monk given to Ovidian levels of adultery), "The Friar's Tale" (about a corrupt summoner), "The Summoner's Tale" (about a corrupt friar), "The Reeve's Tale" (in which a woman is identified as the daughter of a parish priest) and the "General Prologue" in which numerous members of the clergy are identified as more worldly in their ways than spiritual. And this list is by no means exhaustive.

architecture that had been borrowed from France, the English Perpendicular style was widely copied on the continent.²⁸ Again, these were technological and artistic innovations whose origins can be plainly observed prior to the Black Death but which were exacerbated and encouraged along certain lines as a response to that plague. The emergence of the Perpendicular Gothic style, as with Lollardy, both indicate a significant shift in perspective.

This unique and impactful period (sometimes simply called the *Perpendicular*) is the third chronological division of English Gothic architecture, and is so named because it is characterised by an emphasis on vertical lines and elaborations; it is also known as 'International Gothic', the 'Rectilinear style', or the 'Late Gothic'. The Perpendicular style began to emerge in its fullest form c. 1350, immediately following the first wave of the Black Death. Though, it had been evolving earlier and possibly as a response in part to the Great Famine. The earliest example of this style is at the chapter house of Old St Paul's Cathedral, by William Ramsey in 1332.²⁹ It had developed out of the Decorated style of the late 13th century and early 14th century, and lasted into the mid-16th century (with its notable revival in the 19th century--another time of dramatic social and technological change). The English Perpendicular Gothic style has been considered a specifically English reaction to the Black Death, with its emphasis on verticality in higher church structures seen to be metaphorically reaching up to God, craving divine assistance in a time of great anxiety. An appeal to divine assistance was understandable, given the circumstances, and the era of the Plague saw a flurry of donations by elites to the Church (in no small part to pay for the new, Perpendicular Gothic renovations) as well as the increased establishment of private chapels in castles and manor houses. Doom paintings that graphically depicted the biblical Apocalypse and Final Judgement also became much more common in parish churches and chapels.

Alongside this, and in part due to the squeeze on incomes following the Great Famine, was a reduction in charitable donations and hospital foundations.³⁰ The latter was perhaps also indicative of an elite withdrawal to the relative safety of their demesnes. But appeals to the divine during such a crisis are not new to the medieval era, as earlier pandemics have demonstrated.³¹ What was different

28. J. S. Curl, and S. Wilson (Eds.) *s.v.* "Gothic," in *A Dictionary of Architecture and Landscape Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

29. M. C. Schurr and R. E. Bork (Eds.) *s.v.* "art and architecture: Gothic," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The developments were as follows: Early to High Gothic and Early English (c.1130–c.1240) Rayonnant Gothic and Decorated Style (c.1240–c.1350) Late Gothic: flamboyant and perpendicular (c.1350–c.1500).

30. M. Baily, "Peasant Welfare in England, 1290-1348," *Economic History Review* New Series 51, no. 2 (1998): 21-23.

31. See Papanikos, "Thucydides and the Synchronous Pandemic," 15, for Pericles' reported turn to religion when he suffered from the 5th century B.C. plague in Athens,

here was the sheer scale and duration, spurring on further changes in both technology and in perspective. Will there be a new architecture in response to the Covid-19 pandemic? A flurry of architectural articles appeared from 2020 onwards ranging from redesigning spaces for better ventilation to prevent infection and promote social distancing to Keynesian-style building programmes to encourage economic recovery.³² This is an emerging relationship with space and architecture that remains to be seen as it is ongoing.

Architecture and art were not alone in changing as a result of the tumultuous events of the 14th Century. Turning from the ecclesiastical to the secular realm, one additional, if more subtle, shift in perspective, may be observed in changing styles of clothing. In the modern era, we hardly think twice about such things as trends come and go at a sometimes dizzying pace. However, medieval fashion in Europe had changed relatively little for nearly a thousand years, since the fall of the Western Roman Empire--that is, until the Calamitous 14th Century. At that time, clothing became more "modern" and form-fitting.³³ The cotehardie and tight-fitting hose seem to prefigure contemporary styles such as the hoodie and skinny jeans. Shoe styles too, especially those worn by men, metamorphosed into a bizarre array of forms that usually entailed elongated, pointed arrangements at the toe-end. This culminated in the unwieldy and excessively pointed Krakow shoe which was almost too cumbersome to actually be useful for walking.³⁴ The sudden and dramatic shift in clothing styles must be indicative of a profounder alteration going on in wider society--again, a society that had changed relatively little for the better part of a millennium. Obsession with fashion among the survivors of the plague was so extensive that the English Crown instituted a number of sumptuary laws in an attempt to reinforce the *status quo* of the medieval hierarchy.³⁵ As with the Statute of Labourers, to be presently considered, these proved impossible to enforce. And we may deduce that the sudden and marked revision of clothing styles represented, as with the Perpendicular Gothic architecture, a shift in perspective. Potentially it compares well with a contemporary favouring of more comfortable clothing styles (which arguably was already happening) as a result of so many working from home during the

along with more modern parallels in modern, Orthodox Greek society in the throes of COVID-19.

32. See, e.g., K. Chayka, "How the Coronavirus Will Reshape Architecture: What kinds of space are we willing to live and work in now?" in *The New Yorker*, 17 June 2020; Z. ElZein, and Y. ElSemary, "Re-Thinking Post-Pandemic Home Design: How COVID-19 Affected the Perception and Use of Residential Balconies in Egypt," *Future Cities and Environment* 8, no. 1 (2022): 2.

33. J. Laver, *The Concise History of Costume and Fashion* (New York: H.N. Abram, 1979), 62.

34. L. Pratt and L. Woolley, *Shoes* (London: V&A Publications, 2008), 12-13.

35. I. Mortimer, *The Time Traveller's Guide to Medieval England* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 103 ff.

current pandemic; though, this is perhaps somewhat less dramatic and it remains to be seen how permanent it will be.³⁶ The fact remains that many of us put on extra weight during the protracted periods of lockdown. Some of us used that time to work out and put on more muscle mass. And the prevailing fashion trend in mid-/late-2022 has seen a return to the more loose-fitting styles of the 1990s. Would this have happened anyway due to the cyclical nature of nostalgia and the normal recycling of past trends? Or has that cycle now been disrupted due to the intervention of the pandemic? Time will tell.

The 'micro-relationship' with fashion in society, then or now, is one feature of this change in response to crises that we can observe. Another catastrophe would redefine multiple such relationships and it bears even stronger comparison with the modern world in terms of similitude and consequences. This major crisis of the 14th century which is being alluded to here was the Hundred Years War. The author had not thought to include it in any considerable detail except that, in February of 2022, the (modern) Russians unfortunately provided another curious parallel to that earlier era. As with Ukraine, the Hundred Years War was irredentist in nature, albeit effectively a succession crisis. And Edward III's motives compare reasonably well with Russia's in the current war. Vladimir Putin wrote, in a very public essay in 2021, "that Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole", making his intentions clear throughout the essay that he would actively seek to bring Ukraine back into Russia.³⁷ Both Putin and Edward III would take advantage of internal issues and claims to territorial sovereignty in their targets in order to justify involvement. The Plantagenet monarch was ethnically similar to his French counterpart, even if the English people, on the whole, were Saxon rather than Norman or Frankish. These are effectively just different types of Germans, really, if one may be somewhat reductive, and thence comparable to Russians and Ukrainians being ethnically very similar. The case could nevertheless be made that the two medieval combatants were more or less "one people" to varying degrees both culturally and ethnically, at least at the beginning of the war--both Franko-Norman states ruling comparable populations. It would not be so by the end when English-ness and French-ness became much more sharply defined as a result of the protracted conflict and one wonders if a similar galvanisation of separate identities will also obtain between the two Slavic populaces of Russians and Ukrainians, who have been until now very closely related peoples, both in terms of ethnicity and culture. The stamps and images issued following the sinking of the Moscow suggest divergence is already progressing apace.

36. A. de Klerk, "Will the Experience of Lockdown Change the Way we Dress for ever? As Consumer Trends Shift in Response to the Crisis, a New Outlook on Shopping and Style May be Emerging," in *Bazaar*, 7 May 2020.

37. V. Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in *Website of the President of the Russian Federation*, www.kremlin.ru 2021.

The Hundred Years War was also characterised by periods of conflict interspersed with periods of relative peace, not unlike the wider Russian conflicts in Eastern Europe and western Eurasia in such places as Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, South Ossetia and Crimea, spanning from arguably even prior to 2014 (if we include Russian support for the breakaway Transnistria region of Moldova in 2004), up to the present war in Ukraine. We shall see if these last for more than a century; but they do appear to be part of a larger, protracted conflict. It is also the case that the timing of the present and medieval pandemics is comparable in relation to these wars, given that the medieval war and the modern one in Europe both began prior to their respective pandemics. The medieval one will have helped spread the plague. It is yet to be determined how the present war will affect, or will be affected by, COVID-19. As with the current conflict, the main impact on the wider world of the Hundred Years War was also economic. And it should not be surprising that two irredentist wars, separated by so many centuries, nevertheless have much in common. What is perhaps more surprising is that they both came amidst a wider backdrop of multiple crises of a comparable nature.

A little more detail is necessary in order to illustrate some further parallels and differences. The Hundred Years War was precipitated by the fact that in 1328, Charles IV of France passed away, leaving no sons or brothers to take over his kingdom. He did have a sister named Isabella. And she happened to have been the mother of Edward III who was then able to assert (eventually) that, because of this royal connection, he should be the next king of France. However, the French nobles decided that a cousin of Charles, by name of Philip, the Count of Valois, should be crowned king instead. He would be thereafter known as Philip IV, called 'Philip le Bel' (Philip the Fair). Edward was furious but the seventeen-year-old monarch was in no position to do anything about the matter in the late 1320s; he even paid homage to Philip at the latter's coronation, appropriate to Edward's status as Duke of Aquitaine. This act of medieval fealty bears more than a little passing resemblance to the "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation" signed in 1997.³⁸ That treaty was broken in 2014 by a resurgent Russia under Putin with the annexation of Crimea, and subsequently not renewed by Ukraine in 2018 when it officially expired. *Real Politik* and political ambition trumped diplomatic oaths. Similarly, by 1337, Edward was better poised to act and, like Putin, likely had been planning his moves in advance. At that time, French aggression against English holdings on the continent, along with a diplomatic row over an exiled French noble, one of Edward's influential advisers, Robert III of Artois, prompted the English monarch

38. See D. B. Stewart, *The Russian-Ukrainian Friendship Treaty and the Search for Regional Stability in Eastern Europe* (Monterey, CA, December 1997). The treaty was not renewed in 2018 following the annexation of Crimea by Russia.

to declare war.³⁹ Edward was not only seeking the crown of France, which he believed to be his (not unlike Putin's position over Ukraine), but he also feared that Philip was a threat to his possessions in France, including Aquitaine, Gascony and Ponthieu.⁴⁰ Again, one is tempted to draw a parallel here between these disputed territories and the so-called 'Donbas republics' that sought aid and recognition from Russia, and got it. The comparison is not 100% true as Edward already controlled his French holdings; but, clearly Philip, not unlike Ukraine with those breakaway republics, evidently disputed the English Crown's right to control continental territory that was seemingly deemed to be French.

So, Edward needed an army and armies cost money. The feudal system required knights to provide the king with soldiers when demanded. However, the technology of war had advanced since the Battle of Hastings and the longbow was now more feared than the knight on horseback. Arrows fired by longbows could pierce armour at range. All male youths in medieval villages were expected to practice archery and so there were many skilled archers to be found. It was left to a village to decide who would actually fight but the village as a whole had to then look after the family or families affected by departing archers. In England, the latter were paid three pence a day by the Crown.⁴¹ Longbows and cannons would spell the effective end of the medieval cavalry, itself a bastion of the feudal system. Indeed, the obsolescence of the knight was a severe blow to the established social order. The Hundred Years war had begun seemingly as a classic, chivalric tale, as many such conflicts had done between the English and French crowns over previous centuries. But the apparent romance ended in an early-modern tragedy, with much loss of life thanks to the new arms in play, heralding considerably more change to come.

As with the medieval revolution in medieval military affairs, new technologies have also been brought to bear on the war in Ukraine.⁴² The modern equivalent of the long-bowman and early gunpowder weapons is perhaps the extensive use of drone warfare and 'smart weapons' in the present conflict, 'switchblade' and 'loitering' drones in particular, which have effectively levelled the playing field between one of the largest national armies in the world versus a significantly smaller defence force.⁴³ This is similar to the change witnessed by Henry V and the survivors of Agincourt (part of the Hundred Years War) when a smaller band of English soldiers, armed with the most modern weapons of the time, laid waste the "Flower of Chivalry" of France. Apposite to events unfolding

39. This material is mostly covered in Book I of Froissart's *Chronicles*.

40. C. N. Trueman, "The Hundred Years War," in *The History Learning Site*, 5 March 2015.

41. *Ibid.*

42. K. D. Atherton, "How Technology, Both Old and New, Has Shaped the War in Ukraine so Far" in *Popular Science*, 7 April 2022.

43. K. Mizokami, "Self-Destructing 'Kamikaze Drones' Are Hunting Down Targets in Ukraine" in *Popular Mechanics*, 28 March 2022.

in our own era, the main battle tank, along with many of its relations, may soon go the way of the medieval knight on horseback. What had begun as some kind of extension of a programme of Cold War-era irredentism is looking to turn into a game-changing, futuristic conflict that will likely define the shape of wars hereafter, just as the Hundred Years War did in its own time. One could write a whole monograph comparing these two conflicts and their similarities; but, this short analysis will have to suffice for the purposes of this article and its aims. The most immediate effects were and are economic, experienced by all sides and in varying ways, and have had and will continue to have an enduring legacy. Notably however, the repercussions of both of these wars include technological as well as economic changes which then, in turn, made and will make significant impacts on more globally.

The Hundred Years War, then, which lasted somewhat longer than its name suggests, ended in 1453, raging on and off until then and providing a kind of backdrop of interspersed violence for Geoffrey Chaucer, his era and beyond. More relevant here, however, is the economic impact of the War and its mortal losses in concert with the economic devastation caused by the loss of nearly half of the population due to the pandemic. Certainly most of the technological and economic changes were inevitable but they were also impacted by the plague in ways that they would not have been had it not happened. Income and population, as we have seen, had been in decline since the Great Famine. From that time into the era of the Black Death, there was a movement of population from villages to towns and cities. What is more, with so much loss of labour both as a consequence of plague and war, serfs who had been formerly tied to their manors by law and custom would often go to other localities where the lords, in need of work, would hire them for pay. That, alongside the constant need to pay soldiers (and archers), transformed the medieval economy, which had for centuries been based on fealty, goods and services bartered in exchange for a place to live and feudal 'protection', toward a more modern, cash-based system. Again, this article argues that the rapid developments in this era are indicative of a change of perspective and attitude at the cultural level. And this economic change of perspective was significant.

Economic pressures brought about by the Hundred Years War, along with the convergence of the other crises already discussed, led to further changes in people's thinking. The manifest reality of this altered perspective came to a head most profoundly during the deeply troubled reign of Richard II, and in no small part thanks to the heavy-handed taxation imposed by his government, largely to pay for the costs of the ongoing conflicts that had outlived his grandfather, Edward III. The medieval French chronicler, Jean Froissart (c. 1337 – c. 1405), who had spent considerable time at the English court, wrote the following in 1395:

It is the custom in England, as in other countries, for the nobility to have great power over the common people, who are their serfs. This means that they are bound by law

and custom to plough the field of their masters, harvest the corn, gather it into barns, and thresh and winnow the grain; they must also mow and carry home the hay, cut and collect wood, and perform all manner of tasks of this kind. Thus the nobility and clergy are served by right... (II.73)⁴⁴

This is how Froissart prefaces his account of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The rest of the passage seethes with his barely-contained outrage at such a monumental upsetting of the accepted 'apple cart'.

Why did the Peasants revolt? This is too complex a subject to be adequately treated here; however, some details will be canvassed as relevant. Firstly, wages had increased because of the need for workers since the decline in population due to the Great Famine, Black Death and Hundred Years War, with serfs effectively 'playing the market' by quitting their manors to seek out higher pay.⁴⁵ It is difficult to determine actual figures based on the limited evidence available; however, the response of elites clearly points to a wider phenomenon in English society. Maurice Keen has argued that the measurable change in wages was mostly long term and that its ability to effect meaningful change was initially curtailed by the government of King Edward III.⁴⁶ Landholders were set to lose out as a result of increasing wages and so the Ordinance of Labourers was enacted on 18 June 1349, passed into statutory law in 1351. This statute set wages at 1346 levels, prior to the plague when prices were already depressed due to the Great Famine and the high taxes imposed by Edward II, and further forbade employers from hiring workers who had failed to fulfil their contracts with previous lords (such as manorial obligations). Of some historical interest is the fact that the Statute first set a precedent distinguishing labourers who were "able in body" to work and those who could not work for whatever reasons. The Statute officially limited wage increases until around 1370, and it was rigidly enforced by judges when cases actually came to trial; however, it proved difficult to impose on the whole, with many ignoring what was regarded as an unfair law.⁴⁷ Its failure, as Chrystal argues, demonstrated the "redefinition of societal roles" which had been accelerated by the Black Death.⁴⁸ By the end of the 14th century, elites were no longer able to utilise labour legislation to enforce lower wages as the competition between landlords, due to basic principles of supply

44. Jean Froissart, *Froissart's Chronicle* (London: The History Book Club, 1968), 236.

45. The average pay of a "Tiller and Helper" rose from roughly 4 pence in 1349 to around 8 pence in 1399, according to W. Beveridge, "Wages in the Winchester Manors," *The Economic History Review* 7, no. 1 (1936): 43.

46. M. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 137.

47. *Ibid*, 146.

48. P. Chrystal, *The History of the World in 100 Pandemics, Plagues and Epidemics* (Yorkshire and Philadelphia: Pen & Sword History, 2021), 97.

and demand, had become too intense.⁴⁹ This situation gives us a key insight into the timeframe in which the Black Death may be observed to have impacted English Society. It had a measurably positive effect on the economies of commoners in the last decades of the 14th century, even if the Black Death itself was not necessarily the sole trigger for immediate socio-economic change.

Improving wages served to alter perspectives about life and work. It can be observed, then, that attempts to curtail the new prosperity were met with greater resistance than had previously occurred. Something similar may be playing out today with the present Cost of Living crisis. As this is unfolding even as these words are being written, it is too soon to tell. However, it is almost unanimously agreed among scholars, that the poll taxes instituted by the government of Richard II were the final 'straws' that sparked the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.⁵⁰ The discontent ranged across social, economic, religious and political spaces. Previous governments had been reluctant to impose much direct taxation owing to its inherent unpopularity; however, the Hundred Years War with France saw the English army suffering a number of costly military failures. This, along with a reduced tax base due to the sheer number of deaths from famine, plague and war, resulted in the government's demand for ever more increases in taxation from the 1370s onward.⁵¹ A poll tax may be described as a 'flat tax', applying equally to all but unequally affecting all. The poorest in society understandably resented this fact the most as the tax impacted upon them much more than upon the wealthy. The rate for everyone was set at 4 shillings and 5 pence in the first and third poll taxes, regardless of income. This represents approximately 11 days' worth of work for a skilled tradesman and would have been a painfully high tax burden for poorer workers, given that it was applied unilaterally.⁵² Even so, Kesteven has argued that it was the clumsy way in which the third poll tax in particular was assessed in 1380, and the harshness with which it was collected, that sparked the revolt, and not necessarily the tax by itself.⁵³ And it proved a difficult tax to collect, despite strenuous efforts. Tax records were destroyed; tax collectors were assaulted; when they returned with armed guards, even these were overwhelmed by armed commoners who saw them off in Kent and Essex. An official inquiry into the resulting shortfall was undertaken due to the fact 450,000 taxpayers had somehow 'disappeared' off the official register since the 1377 poll tax.⁵⁴

49. S. J. Borsch, *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (Austin, TX, USA: University of Texas Press, 2005), 61.

50. See M. Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348-1500* (London: Penguin, 1990), 41; W. M. Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300-1450* (London: Palgrave, 1995), 106.

51. R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London: Routledge, 1973), 162.

52. The National Archives, Currency Converter 1270-2017.

53. G. R. Kesteven, *The Peasants' Revolt* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 31.

54. *Ibid*, 30.

Many other factors may be adduced as causes of the Peasants' Revolt and these include religious discontent and likely some middle-class agitation over what must have been perceived as attempts to reduce their new-found prosperity alongside that of the poorer classes. Some modern scholars, such as Aston, even consider the Revolt to have been almost wholly a response to religious oppression tied to feudal control, arguing that the aim was to completely demolish the Church as an institution.⁵⁵ Indeed, the rebel leader, Wat Tyler, had demanded that the Church give up its landholdings to parishioners, however realistic or otherwise such a demand may have been.⁵⁶ The Lollards had complained of the Church's greed and wealth, holding doctrinal views compatible with Tyler's position on Church property, and a Lollard Priest named John Ball was one of the leaders of the uprising, later executed by the Crown. At any rate, in May of 1381, an army of commoners mainly from Kent and Essex marched on London. They did what no one had done before or since, capturing the Tower of London and executing the Archbishop of Canterbury along with the royal treasurer. Richard II, who was only fourteen at the time, met the peasants at a place called Mile End. Initially he agreed to all of their demands, including that "no man should be in serfdom" thereafter.⁵⁷ He would later renege on this, claiming that he had been under duress at the time. The leaders of the revolt would be executed and no real gains for the peasants can be evidenced in the immediate aftermath of the revolt.

The official reaction to the Peasants' Revolt, along with the laws and taxes that had in no small part led to it, reveal the attitudes of elites seeking to preserve the *status quo*, while ignoring the fact that the *status quo* no longer applied nor could be made to apply in this changed environment. An *apropos* example of this sort of attitudinal blinkeredness may be seen in an illustration conveniently supplied from the biography of one Geoffrey Chaucer, the son of a successful vintner who supplied wine to royalty. Chaucer was married to a lady-in-waiting to Queen Philippa, wife of Edward III. He had also boosted his career by becoming a courtier to the Countess of Ulster. This aspiring commoner (whose granddaughter would become the Duchess of Suffolk through a sequence of arranged marriages) made a careful study of the medieval art and traditions of heraldry, that uniquely feudal way of identifying a noble house through its elaborately designed, symbolic corporate logo. In 1386, Chaucer even gave evidence as an expert before the Court of Chivalry in a dispute between Sir Richard Scrope and Sir Robert Grosvenor, cousins who were both claiming the

55. M. Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasants Revolt," *Past & Present* 143 (1994): 3-47, 4.

56. See A. Harding, "The Revolt Against the Justices," in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston (eds.), *The English Rising of 1381* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 165. And see C. W. Hollister, *The Making of England 55B.c. to 1399* (Boston: Heath, 2001), 341.

57. "The Anonimal Chronicle," in C. Oman, *The Great Revolt of 1381* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), 198.

same heraldic device.⁵⁸ This was one of many such cases fought over heraldry and it illustrates the importance of such symbolism in identifying status and its inherent privileges within the feudal hierarchy. The Scrope and Grosvenor case had turned violent at times, with fighting taking place between the rivals' supporters and even involving other nobles allied with the contestants. Such disputes demonstrate how vehemently elites clung to this system, even as it was passing away, while remaining seemingly oblivious to the fact of its passing.

The Peasants' Revolt, then, aptly marks the point at which we can definitively say that something fundamental had changed. And feudalism, in England at any rate, would be effectively dead within a century. Even by the time of the Peasants' Revolt, it was on its way out the metaphorical door. Was this an inevitable process? Critics who embrace the gradualist approach have asserted that the self-sufficient manor was already in decline due to the rise of trade and growth of urban spaces with the concurrent increase in a cash-based economy, which led to gradually improving conditions for the serfs of fourteenth century England.⁵⁹ McKisack has argued that the end of the manorial village was prefigured prior to the Black Death.⁶⁰ Engels' famous Marxian critique of the change focuses almost entirely on the economic shift toward the use of currency in primarily urban environments. He virtually ignored the impact of the Black Death, declaring that "by the fifteenth century... an economy based on money was emerging fully fledged and this marked the decline of feudal authority and the old order".⁶¹ Certainly the gradualist view is not without some merits as technological and social changes were indeed occurring and can be demonstrated. Yet these and other sources are seemingly unable to offer satisfactory evidence to support their theory of definitive manorial decline until *after* the pandemic, possibly as a result of such a significant shift in the demographics. While one can choose to focus entirely on demographics and economics, the role of an altered perspective appears to be perhaps the most significant.

Very little of what has been presented so far is new, nor would it come as any surprise to medieval historians who have most definitely dealt with these subjects in much greater detail and depth than has this article. The aim of the above material is not simply to rehash the history of the 'Calamitous 14th Century'. So far, it has demonstrate how multiple catastrophic events, occurring in relatively close temporal proximity, have interfered with and influenced an historical process that was arguably already underway. Any single crisis, or even

58. See D. A. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (London: Blackwell, 1995), *passim*.

59. S. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages* (London and New York: MacMillan Press, 1995), 62.

60. M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 328.

61. Friedrich Engels, "The Decline of Feudalism and the Rise of the Bourgeoisie," in *Monthly Review*, April 1957, 445-454.

a couple of them, might not have had nearly so much impact. Elites almost invariably seek to preserve the *status quo* (as it preserves their positions, wealth etc.) and they might have been able to do so in the 14th century with fewer crises at play. But too many jinn were loosed from too many bottles, so to speak. Too many perspectives were changed; too much of the demographic, and crucially its mind-set, was altered. Technological and artistic innovations that were already progressing became intensified. Perspectives shifted. The world had turned and, as Robinson Jeffers fittingly put into the mouth of Euripides' *Medea* in his rendition of that eponymous play, written during the darkest days of the Second World War, it had "turned sharp too".⁶² It is now worthwhile to consider some further parallels with the modern era and ask how our own world is turning, or if it has already turned 'sharp', with us largely being unaware of the fact, caught up as we are in the flow of events.

Perhaps the most obvious parallel with the Calamitous 14th Century is the current pandemic. Yet here there are major differences that need to be acknowledged. If the medieval Black Death killed nearly half of the population of Europe (this being a rough figure at best, with even less accuracy for the rest of the world), then the demographic shift at that time would have been much more significant than that of today. The estimated, global population in 1400 has been reckoned to be about 360 million, which is tiny compared with the current population, which is closer to about 7 billion.⁶³ At the time of writing, the current, official, worldwide death toll due to Covid-19 stood at roughly 6,134,555, which is a 'drop in the bucket' when compared with the medieval death toll, though still not an insignificant demographic shift.⁶⁴ Of course, these are official, government figures which may not be wholly accurate and which may not take into account the actual number of deaths associated with, but not caused directly by, the pandemic such as the lack of accessibility to medical treatment during lockdown, impact on immunity to other diseases, suicides due to depression caused by the pandemic, long term mental illness, as well as a potential obesity crisis on account of lockdown and its alteration of eating and exercise habits.⁶⁵ The figure might even be double the officially reported one but that is still relatively small by comparison to that of the Black Death in the 14th Century. It seems that our technological advancements have allowed the modern world to deal with our plague much better, in terms of loss of life, than our medieval forebears. Although, it is worth pointing out that we have not yet seen the end of this

62. R. Jeffers, *The Medea* (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1942), 380 ff. It is perhaps best known from the 1982, Kennedy Center production of that play.

63. C. McEvedy, and R. Jones, *Atlas of World Population History, Facts on File* (Penguin: New York, 1978); and data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division.

64. Worldometer info (Delaware, U.S.A.)

65. M. Senthilingam, "COVID-19 Has Made the Obesity Epidemic Worse, but Failed to Ignite Enough Action," *British Medical Journal* (2021): 372.

pandemic and neither can we say for certain as to whether or not others might follow fast on its heels (Will the monkeypox become a contender?). So there is still scope for a comparable demographic shift.

Since this article has focused somewhat more on the U.K., we can look at the figures there a little more closely and perhaps draw some conclusions about how these deaths might impact that specific society, at least. Out of a population of 68,500,576, Britain has officially lost, at time of writing, 164,282 to COVID-19 (or 2,398 per 1 million people), which is the highest death toll in Europe.⁶⁶ This figure equates to approximately 2.4 people dead per thousand. By contrast, and with a much smaller population of somewhere between 4-7 million, the death toll of medieval England due to the Black Death was closer to 50-60 people per thousand.⁶⁷ Again, some latitude for error must be given here as the medieval demographics are much less accurately recorded; but, even taking that into account, we can see a considerably greater impact on the population than in the current pandemic. However, we can also break down the modern demographics somewhat more and perhaps determine how that might impact society in the near future. For example, in England in that same time-period, there have been officially reported 43,256 deaths of elderly care-home residents involving Covid-19 since the start of the coronavirus pandemic and that is a significant portion of the 164,282 deaths, accounting for nearly ¼ of the total.⁶⁸ Those with pre-existing medical conditions also suffered a high rate of attrition. Of deaths in England and Wales where COVID-19 was the underlying cause, diabetes was the most common pre-existing condition recorded on the death certificate (October to December of 2021). This was identified in almost a quarter (22.5%) of the Covid-19 deaths. Chronic lower respiratory diseases were the second most common condition at 18.7% of deaths. Overall, the proportion of COVID-19 deaths with no pre-existing conditions remained comparable in October to December of 2021 (16.8%), and with July to September of 2021 (17.4%).⁶⁹

These raw figures do suggest something about one kind of potential change resulting from these deaths. It appears that a third to half of the deaths in the U.K. were among the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions (who also tend to be among the elderly to no small extent). And, again, the actual figures may be significantly higher. Assuming those people would not have died when they did, and in such numbers, then their sudden absence from the population should have some measureable impact, this article predicts, that will likely be most apparent during future elections, and especially in marginal seats. This hinges on

66. Worldometer info (Delaware, U.S.A.); bearing in mind that the actual figure might be double this official one.

67. C. Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (London: UCL Press, 1996), 17-18.

68. U.K. Office of National Statistics, *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Latest Insights: Deaths, 24 March 2022*.

69. Ibid.

the assumption that older voters tend to favour the Conservative Party and that their sudden reduction in numbers will translate to a paradigm shift at the polls. This remains to be seen and it does not take into account other factors affecting voting behaviour that might also obtain. Certainly earlier pandemics also saw political upheavals; although, these may be difficult to predict *in media res*.⁷⁰ However, the more interesting parallel with the medieval era in question, and one that relies less on speculation, is a change in perspective and attitude.

The years from early 2020 to 2022 have witnessed considerable violations of societal norms. People had to become accustomed to many restrictions ranging from limits on normal social mixing to the number of family/friends who would be permitted to attend the funeral of a loved one. One more obvious such change brought about by the pandemic was with regard to employment and employers. It seems less likely today that we might expect another Peasants' Revolt, although a General Strike is not off the cards, given the various economic pressures being experienced by households. Even so, there has been, and continues to be a change in perspective in this regard. The most obvious example of this was the sudden possibility (for the middle classes, at least) of working from home, when that had mostly not been an option before. There has been, unsurprisingly, considerable resistance on the part of our managerial class to allow this new model of work, even during the height of the pandemic; yet the latter "rendered those objections irrelevant".⁷¹ This attitude persists and has been recently illustrated by Jacob Rees Mogg, the so-called U.K. Minister of State for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, who had a well-publicised walk around the civil service offices in Whitehall, leaving notes encouraging people to return to their desks.⁷² He even wrote an article to that effect in the *Mail on Sunday* declaring that "Working from home is a bad habit. And it's ruining the economy".⁷³ The U.K. prime minister (at time of writing), Boris Johnson, even weighed into this debate telling the *Daily Mail* (13/05/2022) that "working from home doesn't work".

These and others are clear examples of modern elites clinging to an outmoded *status quo* even as the world is turning before their eyes. Such *doctrinaire*, managerialist dogma that had obtained for most of the 20th century, however, has been debunked almost overnight by hard-core reality. While some debate will doubtless persist, objections about the impact that working from

70. See Papanikos, "Thucydides and the Synchronous Pandemic," 18 ff. for such political changes in consequence of the 5th century, Athenian plague.

71. L. Colley, and S. Williamson, "With Management Resistance Overcome, Working from Home May be Here to Stay," in *The Conversation*, 23 August 2020.

72. See I. Hislop (Ed.) "Brush with Death," *Private Eye* 1572 (29 April - 12 May 2022): 7.

73. J. R. Mogg, "Working from Home is a Bad Habit. And it's Ruining the Economy," in *The Mail on Sunday*, 24 April 2022. He compared them with the cleaners in Whitehall who came in to work during the pandemic; though, he failed to mention that they had no choice in the matter due to their contracts and number of them caught COVID-19 and died as a result.

home would have on productivity may be quickly silenced by ample evidence to the contrary.⁷⁴ Efficiency was not negatively impacted; it even improved in some instances. Indeed, working from home has also been observed to reduce worker inequality, resisting the need to relocate to expensive urban areas and resulting in workers spending more of their income in smaller localities. What is more, this may reverse the trend of city growth that began in Chaucer's era, with a concurrent alteration to the voting demographics as cities would no longer be the exclusive bastions of so-called 'liberal elitism'. A more equitable spread of the voting spectrum might obtain in both city and countryside, upsetting the boat, so to speak, of established politics in which cities typically prefer more liberal candidates and rural areas more conservative ones, with the latter being somewhat more privileged due to the present, gerrymandered structure of the constituencies. The U.K Office for National Statistics has predicted that 57% of British workers will work at least partially from home by the autumn of 2022, and that two thirds of Britons are already working flexibly in some way.⁷⁵ While many of our leaders seem stuck in the past, they would do well to note that, "as all post-industrial towns know, if you don't go out and meet the future, eventually it simply moves on without you."⁷⁶ Will a new Statute of Labourers now be rushed through Parliament in a vain attempt to force workers back into the office?

As if working from home were not dramatic enough, also to the horror of neo-Liberal thinkers, many of those workers whose jobs did not permit working from home, or whose work was not deemed "essential", were furloughed for a time at state expense. The world of work was forever turned on its head as we have now seen what was always possible, if previously unthinkable. That shift in the paradigm, in all likelihood coupled with large numbers of people (whether in work or not) being made to stay at home as a result of the public health crisis has led to another change in perspective. We had time and space to reflect on our lives and were given pause to consider what really matters in life. And many came to realise that the previous *status quo* had been, in fact, quite toxic and exploitative--call it 'neo-feudalism', perhaps, with the staggeringly increasing gap in pay between workers, management and chief executives along with the troubling rise of 'zero-hours contracts', which might be regarded as tantamount to perpetuating a kind of serfdom. In the U.S. and the U.K., there has been an almost unprecedented increase in union membership and strikes alongside other

74. Colley and Williamson, "With Management Resistance Overcome, Working from Home May be Here to Stay," 2020.

75. The U.K Office for National Statistics, "Business and Individual Attitudes Towards the Future of Homeworking, UK: April to May 2021: Analysis of the Effects of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic on Office Working and of Business and Individual Attitudes to Future Working Practices".

76. G. Hinsliff, "Remote Working is Making the UK a More Equal Place – However Much Jacob Rees-Mogg May Sneer," in *The Guardian*, Sun 15 May 2022.

emerging labour-related phenomena.⁷⁷ Thus, in Europe and America, the so-called 'Great Resignation' began and continues apace. People would no longer tolerate oppressive environments for low pay and few benefits. In Britain alone, a "survey of 1,000 UK workers reveals that almost a third (29%)...are considering moving to a new job this year".⁷⁸ Interestingly, the figure is rather lower for those companies offering the 'hybrid' (working from home) approach. In the U.S., in November of 2021, "a record 4.5 million workers left their jobs, according to the Labor Department's latest Job Openings and Labor Turnover report".⁷⁹ This trend is expected to slow down somewhat in 2022, but by no means to cease altogether as workers seek better pay and a healthier home/work life-balance. As if to highlight the altered perspective, this condition has also been called 'The Great Reimagination,' 'The Great Reset' and 'The Great Realization'.⁸⁰

This is not to say that we have, or shall soon have, achieved utopia. Far from it. And many who resigned from their posts have regretted doing so.⁸¹ Nevertheless, this appears to have been another societal change that was likely coming at some point anyway, but which has been accelerated by the pandemic. Many of us could have worked from home all along, just as soon as technology allowed (since the mid-90s? Possibly even the 80s); however, it took a shock to the system to demolish the established *status quo* and to inaugurate the emerging paradigm. There will be those elites who want to reassert the old order, much as with their counterparts in 14th century England following the Black Death. Like them, they will likely be unsuccessful and will probably just encourage more rapid change through their vain efforts. An example of this in the U.K. may come in the form of a modern 'poll tax' (or 'flat tax'). The Conservative government was compelled to behave in ways that were utterly contrary to their normative ideological positions during the pandemic. This included, as indicated, the furloughing of many workers (at 80% of their pay), housing all of the homeless (which was accomplished almost overnight, as it turns out) and other massive state expenditures. The Tory government has attempted to pay for some of this, again uncharacteristically for them, by raising National Insurance tax. Therefore, "From 6 April 2022 to 5 April 2023 National Insurance contributions will increase by 1.25 percentage points", and we are told that this "will be spent on the NHS, health and social care".⁸² The primary threshold at which this tax applies will rise

77. H. Rosenkrantz, "Pandemic-Related Rise in Unionization Means Managers Need to Watch Workplace Dynamics," in *SHRM*, 9 March 2021.

78. C. Mills, "Great Resignation Continues – A Third of UK Workers Considering Career Change in 2022," in *the HR Director*, 31 January 2022.

79. M. Smith, "Professor who Predicted 'The Great Resignation' Shares the 3 Trends that Will Dominate Work in 2022," in *CNBC Make It*, Friday, Jan 14 2022. And see too US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary*, 29 March 2022.

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.*

82. H. M. Government, Gov.uk.

to £9,880 per year in April of 2022 and it will then increase again to £12,570 in July, slightly moderating the impact on very low earners.⁸³ This is a somewhat stealthy poll tax; but its greatest impact will likely be felt by those in the lower income range but who are still earning above £12,570.

This modern take on the poll tax comes alongside the revocation of a temporary increase in Universal Credit (welfare) by £20 per week during lockdown, again most affecting the poorest and the working classes.⁸⁴ Add this to a cost of living crisis, higher council tax bills (in the U.K.), higher fuel bills, with the latter being in no small part, but not exclusively, due to the Russian irredentist war with its concomitant economic sanctions. These, along with supply-chain issues emerging post-lockdown, are having a measureable 'knock-on' effect of higher food prices. It is also abundantly clear that the U.K.'s approach to leaving the EU has made an already tricky situation much worse.⁸⁵ And climate change too is playing its part with poor harvests due to the summer heatwave of 2022 affecting both food prices and availability, not dissimilar to the Great Famine of the early 14th Century. If such economic and other trends persist, then something like a modern Peasants' Revolt may become more possible, even inevitable. The cost of living crisis and an apparently supine government that is ideologically disinclined to adopt the measures necessary to improve the situation may yet provoke a General Strike in the U.K.⁸⁶ Indeed, multiple unions have gone on strike since the spring of 2022 and more are set to follow.

Might this result in an implementation of some kind of Universal Basic Income for many, given that automation has already been for some time now removing many jobs from the economy (and also given that robots do not currently buy the products that they make)? There could be UBI for the 'masses' and 'hybrid' or 'flexible' working for those who are fortunate enough to still have jobs. Some kind of dispensation will need to be reached in which the vast profits garnered by wealthy corporations are redistributed in some way to the poor—else they will not be able to purchase the goods that are being mass produced by automation. And the only apparent alternative is to let them starve, which would be unconscionable. This article has suggested that we may be seen to have already been subject to a kind of neo-feudalism for some time. Has the modern pandemic sounded its death-knell, parallel to the impacts of the medieval plague? To be replaced by what? 'Star Trek Socialism'? Or something in between? Is some

83. F. Archer, "National Insurance Changes: How They Will Affect You" in *The Times Money Mentor*, 30 March 2022.

84. A. Jones, and C. Long, "Universal Credit: Removing £20 uplift 'Has Made Every Day a Worry'" in *BBC News*, 10 December 2021.

85. R. Partington, "Brexit is Making Cost of Living Crisis Worse, New Study Claims EU Withdrawal Fuelling Higher Import Costs and Costing British Workers Nearly £500 a Year, Says Resolution Foundation," in *The Guardian* 22/06/2022.

86. See H. Ward-Glenton, "A Tragedy: Britain's Cost-of-Living Crisis Worsens as Rents Soar and Energy Bills Top \$5,000," in *CNBC, Europe Economy*, 11/08/2022.

kind of Malthusian disaster imminent, with a global population approaching unsustainable numbers, as it perhaps did at the end of the 13th Century? Maybe our technology will solve that problem too. And it must be conceded that other possibilities not considered here could also come to pass; only time will tell. But, as with the Calamitous 14th Century, the convergence of crises has both altered many perspectives and sped up the pace of change.

The author of this article asserts that most historians would likely prefer not to be so intimately present within a major 'historical moment', but to observe it from a safe distance in both space and time. We have been living through a succession of major historical moments since at least the 11th of September 2001. What seems certain is that we are set for more such upheavals as the Twenty-First Century unfolds. Climate change, with its inherent concomitants of famine, plague, war and impact on population will take its toll—unless we can somehow find a workable solution. Unlike our medieval forebears, we could actually create our own Little Ice Age, either by design or by accident, as recent events in Ukraine have worryingly implied.⁸⁷ With or without nuclear winter, there will almost certainly be other pandemics and of a sort that may not be easily predicted or addressed, encouraged by climate change and human infringement on ecosystems. It is remarkable that we have not had more of them already, having apparently learned few lessons from the SARS 'almost-pandemic' back in 2003.⁸⁸

As stated, our technology may allow us to mitigate some of the harshness but technological advancement is itself a major driver of transformation at multiple levels. We are supposedly on the verge of nuclear fusion, with its promise of pollution-free and near-limitless energy, and potentially even a workable 'warp drive' to send us hurtling through the cosmos, circumventing the light-speed barrier.⁸⁹ Who can say how those things may change our world and, more crucially, our perspective of how the world should work, if they come to pass? It is also a possibility that, by the end of the century, we may bear witness to comparable demographic and societal shifts to those of the medieval plague era. It is the author's sincerest hope that future historians will not apply to the current

87. e.g., Delegation of the European Union to the International Organisations in Vienna, "Joint Statement dated 12 August 2022 on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant" by the Press and information team of the Delegation to UN and OSCE in Vienna.

88. See M. H. Green, "Taking 'Pandemic' Seriously: Making the Black Death Global," in M. H. Green (ed.), *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death* (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2015), 27-61, for an almost prescient warning about global pandemics that no one appears to have heeded.

89. C. Young, "Physicists Say We're Officially at the 'Threshold of Nuclear Fusion Ignition,'" in *Interesting Engineering*, 18 August 2021; and see R. Ghast, "Star Trek's Warp Drive Leads to New Physics: Researchers are Taking a Closer Look at This Science-fiction Staple—And Bringing the Idea a Little Closer to Reality," in *Scientific American*, 13 July 2021.

era the notorious epithet of the 'Calamitous Twenty-First Century'; but, *ceteris paribus*, we might be fortunate if that term, and the survivability that it implies in comparison to that earlier century of upheavals, defines the extent of our own potential grief. The alternative does not bear contemplation: should there happen to be no one in such a hypothetical future to apply that or any other epithet to our times.

It is no accident, then, that the Death Card in the traditional Tarot deck represents change. That "privee thief" has always been a major driver of change and continues to be. This article has demonstrated that significant parallels exist between the multiple crises faced by the 14th Century, Black Death era and the contemporary age of COVID-19, as well as some parallels in the responses to those respective crises. If the argument for these phenomena producing an altered perspective and increasing the pace of change is correct, then our world must be on the cusp of a new age; likely the point of no return has already passed. Technology that is even now developing will probably be sent into overdrive by the impact of the multiple crises. Consider how quickly vaccines were rolled out compared with earlier in the 20th Century. These technological changes, in turn, will both affect and be affected by changing attitudes. We can predict that the changes will be no less dramatic for us as they were for Chaucer's England: that is, at least as profound as the shift from medieval feudalism to early-modern capitalism, with a clear sense of 'before' and 'after', if only clearly discerned in hindsight. The metamorphosis is already upon us and it is too late to put the jinni back into its bottle, even if we wanted to do so. And while we may prognosticate with perhaps some accuracy, based on past examples, it remains unclear as to precisely what shape this 'New Normal' will have, except that it will likely upset many of our cherished paradigms and violate numerous societal norms, for worse or for better.

The author of this article is aware that it has made a number of tentative conclusions throughout about shifting relationships in our society as a result of crises. These are little more than informed speculation as, to reiterate, historians cannot predict the future; even so, it should be clear by now that these attempted prognostications are informed by some rather striking historical precedents. Of course it is difficult to define an historical moment while immersed within it. However, one thing is absolutely clear: we are living through unequivocally interesting times. And they are probably set to become even more interesting as the era unfolds. If the Calamitous 14th Century has taught us anything about humankind's ability to survive multiple existential and philosophical upheavals, it is that the most important driver of change is that within our own minds and perspectives. As the Buddha reportedly said: "We are what we think./All that we are arises with our thoughts./With our thoughts we make the world."⁹⁰ And we

90. The Buddha, *The Dhammapada* (Pasadena, California: Theosophical University Press, 1980), 2.

shall soon see what sort of world our thoughts, altered by the impact of these and perhaps other multiple crises, will make. Historical insights permit some limited projections based on comparatively similar trends. The only thing that we can say for certain, however, is that our relatively near future is likely to be dramatically different from our recent past. Even so, it is heartening to observe that, at the end of the Middle Ages, our civilisation suffered an arguably worse crisis than we are presently experiencing, however comparable. As we have seen, they faced climate change, plague, war, famine, technological transformation, societal upheaval and, to quote Shea and Wilson, "many megadeaths";⁹¹ yet humanity not only endured but eventually prospered. Thus our forebears of that era have demonstrated just how resilient and adaptable human beings can be when faced with overwhelming adversity. One can but hope that we shall repeat that aspect of their history as well.

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91. R. A. Wilson, and R. Shea, *The Illuminatus Trilogy* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1975), *passim*.

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