

The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study

Stuart J. Borsch

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. 195 pages.

In this cross-regional comparative study, Stuart Borsch marshals medieval economic data to address why, following the Black Death, “Egypt’s centralized and urban landholding system was unable to adapt to massive depopulation, while England’s localized and rural landholding system had fully recovered by the year 1500” (dust jacket). After making a quick dispatch of antiquated theories and flawed research, he introduces new findings on medieval Egypt’s sharp financial downturn in contrast to England’s economic stabilization and upswing.

The author points out that both states were centralized monarchies with similar population levels and agrarian-based economies overseen by “big stick” aristocracies. Egypt had a modicum of arable land along the Nile; England had large areas of pastoral land and far more arable soil (pp. 16-17). In addition, Egypt’s nonhereditary ruling Mamluk elite, imported Caucasian and Central Asian slave children (some of whom actually ruled), became iron-handed absentee landholders: “A vast gulf separated the Mamluk warrior-landholder from the Egyptian peasant. A barracks-trained Turkish- or Circassian-speaking Mamluk and a village peasant were probably as for-

eign to each other as Egyptians and Europeans” (p. 27). This social separation, which helped the landowning system to function well before the plagues, contributed to its breakdown afterward.

Borsch's tome is meant for comparative and world historians, along with scholars of pre-modern Middle Eastern economic history. He notes that narrative chronicles, in tandem with other extant sources (e.g., chancery manuals), formed the lion's share of his source materials. Cairene sources included unpublished institutional endowment deeds (*waqfiyyat*) from the archives of Egypt's Ministry of Religious Endowments. These deeds reference details of endowed structures and how the state handled and extracted revenue.

The author's introductory chapter explains the plague's three clinical forms: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. He hypothesizes that the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which causes all three forms, may have been a “mutant strain” of a less devastating bacterium that afflicted the Mediterranean region as early as the sixth century. The powerful new strain originated in Central Asia and raged through China, the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere during the fourteenth century: “Plague depopulation, both urban and rural, was at least as severe in Egypt as in the more heavily stricken areas of Western Europe. ... Egypt lost roughly half its total population, taking into account the initial Black Death and subsequent plague outbreaks” (p. 15).

Borsch sets out “to find two economies with similar parameters (e.g., population, levels of GDP, predominance of agriculture, percentage of long-distance trade in the economy, royal control, etc.) so that a comparison of agricultural regimes can be carried out with a degree of normative control” (p. 21). In so doing, he is “able to discover the exact value of the *dinar jayshi* (a unit of account) and, consequently, to extract solid quantitative statistics from Egypt's 1315 land survey in order to determine Egypt's land revenue before the plagues” (p. 11). He also argues convincingly that “the landholding system, not geography alone, determined the outcome for Egypt's agrarian economy” (p. 19).

Chapter 2 explains how Egypt's canals and inland waterways transported plague-infected fleas and rats on small grain-carrying vessels (p. 25). Here, he draws attention to the Mamluks' dependency on the “*mubashirun*” (civilian bureaucrats connected with rural revenue collection) to manage and stream payments to the landowners. Chapter 3 addresses how the plagues wreaked havoc on the rural economy and drove peasants to urban centers. Compounding this disaster was the bureaucratic mismanagement of Egypt's all-important irrigation systems. Although Bedouin raids included dike sabotage and basin ruinage (p. 51) to expand their own crop territories, “Al-

Maqrizi singles out for blame the amirs (particularly amirs of one hundred) who ke[pt] the irrigation tax for themselves” (p. 43) instead of maintaining the canals and dikes.

Chapter 4 covers the impact of plague-related depopulation (p. 54) on England’s rural economy: “English landowners were far more likely to live in their manor houses or, failing that, they would at least visit their rural estates. Many of the Mamluk landholders, in contrast, had never even seen their estates” (p. 55). Per capita income, greater economic opportunities for lower classes, and a more efficient and responsive economy (p. 65) resulted in England’s economic recovery by the end of the fifteenth century, despite the Wat Tyler peasant uprising of 1381.

Chapter 5 reviews the genesis of the *dinar jayshi* and its relationship with Egyptian bumper crops of wheat, barley, and broad beans and with arable land use and management. Chapter 6 analyzes the “price and wage ‘scissors’” in medieval Egypt and England. Wages in England rose steadily, while they fell in Egypt: “The comparison of Egyptian and English agrarian living standards is, in the end, more important than any absolute comparison of prices and wages” (p. 101).

The author concludes: “Where English landowners failed in their efforts to collectively confront a scarce rural labor market, Egyptian landholders triumphed brilliantly. The consequences were disaster for Egypt’s rural economy, the backbone of its economic power ... Without the dramatic exogenous shock of the plague, the story of Egypt’s development would have been very different” (pp. 113-14). Borsch encourages scholars to undertake similar studies comparing Egypt’s landholding and water systems with those of Syria, Iran, Ottoman Anatolia, the Balkans, China, and elsewhere (p. 115). The use of selective photographs would have enhanced his effective presentation of data via flowcharts, diagrams, and tables.

Borsch does more than just illustrate that the plagues severely affected Islamic societies; he reveals that differences in the resilience of the two states’ agrarian economies are not solely attributable to differing quantities of arable land and readily available water, for contrasting landholding systems also played a role. In sum, his analysis of archival materials produces fresh data that will enlighten historians, economists, and political scientists as they reexamine economic patterns that put such states as England and Egypt on disparate financial paths in the late medieval period.

Jeffrey C. Burke

Visiting Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies, Department of Religious Studies
College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts