Crisis and Renaissance

1340–1492

Currents of both crisis and renewal swept through medieval society in the years 1340–1492. On the one hand, throughout the fourteenth century, Europeans faced myriad challenges, from pestilence to war to rebellions. On the other hand, the city-states of the northern Italian peninsula helped to spark a period of great creativity that historians often refer to as the Renaissance, which reached its peak in the 1400s. The documents in this chapter capture these twin themes, beginning with contemporary accounts of the catastrophic effects of the Black Death and the search for scapegoats, though many people viewed the plague as divine punishment. The Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453) added to people’s troubles as the kings of France and England battled for land and prestige. Both sides raised taxes to finance the war, leading to a wave of rebellions, including the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, described in Document 2. The very church that at its height had claimed to be the spiritual and temporal head of Christendom could not help because it was a house divided and threatened by abuses and calls for reform, as the selections by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400; Document 3) and letters of Jan Hus (1427–1415; Document 4) reveal. At the same time, however, men of the upper classes in Italy defined themselves self-consciously as living in new times. For such men and a few women, this was a time of rebirth, distinct from what they viewed as a millennium of barbarism. Imitating the values and styles of antiquity, the Renaissance was defined by the studia humanitatis (roughly, the liberal arts), from which the term humanism was derived. The fifth document illustrates the application and possibilities of humanism, whereas the sixth document demonstrates that the realities of Italian life often did not match Renaissance ideals.

1.

Demographic Catastrophe

The Black Death (Fourteenth Century)

Few events in history have had such a shattering impact on every aspect of society as the plague, which reached Europe in 1347. The Black Death decimated a society already weakened by a demographic crisis, famines, and climatic disasters. It is exi-
mated that one-third of Europe’s population died in the first wave of plague, which
was followed by repeated outbreaks. Some cities may have lost over half their people
in 1347–1348 alone. Though the devastation was social, psychological, economic,
political, and even artistic, many historians believe that in the long term the plague
led to significant changes and even improvements in Western life. The following doc-
uments describe the arrival of the plague in various places and responses to it, includ-
ing searches for its cause and people on whom to fix blame. The plague ultimately
precipitated much of the crisis that characterized the fourteenth century.

From Ordinances against the Spread of Plague, Pistoia

2 May, 1348

1. So that the sickness which is now threatening the region around Pistoia shall
be prevented from taking hold of the citizens of Pistoia, no citizen or resident of
Pistoia, wherever they are from or of what condition, status or standing they may
be, shall dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca; and no one shall come to Pistoia
from those places; penalty 500 pence. And no one from Pistoia shall receive or give
hospitality to people who have come from those places; same penalty. And the
guards who keep the gates of the city of Pistoia shall not permit anyone travelling
to the city from Pisa or Lucca to enter; penalty 10 pence from each of the guards
responsible for the gate through which such an entry has been made. But citizens
of Pistoia now living within the city may go to Pisa and Lucca, and return again,
if they first obtain permission from the common council—who will vote on the
merits of the case presented to them. The licence is to be drawn up by the notary of
the anziani and gonfalonier of the city.¹ And this ordinance is to be upheld and
observed from the day of its ratification until 1 October, or longer if the council
sees fit.

2. No one, whether from Pistoia or elsewhere, shall dare or presume to bring
or fetch to Pistoia, whether in person or by an agent, any old linen or woollen
cloths, for male or female clothing or for bedspreads; penalty 200 pence, and the
cloth to be burnt in the public piazza of Pistoia by the official who discovered it.²

From Rosemary Horrox, ed. and trans., The Black Death (Manchester: Manchester University

¹The official rulers of Italian cities were the commune (a word which does not have its mod-
ern egalitarian connotations). They appointed a podestà, often a nobleman from outside the
region, as their salaried chief executive. By the fourteenth century this arrangement was
mirrored in many cities by the more broadly based popolo, represented by a governing
council of anziani (elders). The capitano del popolo corresponded, in background and role,
to the podestà of the commune.

²Later outbreaks of plague in Italian cities were often associated with the movement of
cloth, and this requirement suggests that the connection may already have been noted.
Contemporaries—who were not aware of the role played by fleas in the transmission of the
disease—explained the connection as due to the trapping of corrupt air within the folds of
fabric.
However it shall be lawful for citizens of Pistoia travelling within Pistoia and its territories to take linen and woollen cloths with them for their own use or wear, provided that they are in a pack or farde weighing 30 lb or less. And this ordinance to be upheld and observed from the day of its ratification until 1 January. And if such cloth has already been brought into Pistoia, the bringer must take it away within three days of the ordinance’s ratification; same penalty.

3. The bodies of the dead shall not be removed from the place of death until they have been enclosed in a wooden box, and the lid of planks nailed down so that no stench can escape, and covered with no more than one pall, coverlet or cloth; penalty 50 pence to be paid by the heirs of the deceased or, if there are no heirs, by the nearest kinsmen in the male line. The goods of the deceased are to stand as surety for the payment of the penalty. Also the bodies are to be carried to burial in the same box; same penalty. So that the civic officials can keep a check on this, the rectors of the chapels in Pistoia must notify the podestà and capitano when a corpse is brought into their chapel, giving the dead man’s name and the contrada in which he was living when he died; same penalty. As soon as he has been notified, the podestà or capitano must send an official to the place, to find out whether this chapter of the ordinances is being observed, along with the other regulations governing funerals, and to punish those found guilty. And if the podestà or capitano is remiss in carrying out these orders he must be punished by those who appointed him; same penalty. But these regulations should not apply to the poor and destitute of the city, who are dealt with under another civic ordinance.

4. To avoid the foul stench which comes from dead bodies each grave shall be dug two and a half armslength deep, as this is reckoned in Pistoia, penalty 10 pence from anyone digging or ordering the digging of a grave which infringes the statute.

5. No one, of whatever condition, status or standing, shall dare or presume to bring a corpse into the city, whether coffin or not; penalty 25 pence. And the guards at the gates shall not allow such bodies to be brought into the city; same penalty, to be paid by every guard responsible for the gate through which the body was brought.

6. Any person attending a funeral shall not accompany the corpse or its kinsmen further than the door of the church where the burial is to take place, or go back to the house where the deceased lived, or to any other house on that occasion; penalty 10 pence. Nor is he to go [to] the week’s mind of the deceased; same penalty.

7. When someone dies, no one shall dare or presume to give or send any gift to the house of the deceased, or to any other place on that occasion, either before or after the funeral, or to visit the house, or eat there on that occasion; penalty 25 pence. This shall not apply to the sons and daughters of the deceased, his blood

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3The bodies of ordinary people were generally buried in shrouds, although they might be carried to church in a coffin. This ordinance probably implies that they were to be buried in a coffin.

4A braccio in Pistoia measured between two and two and a half feet.

5This last sentence refers to a ban on attendance at the commemorative mass one week after a death.
brothers and sisters and their children, or to his grandchildren. The podestà and capitano, when notified by the rector as in chapter 3, must send an official to enquire whether anything has been done to the contrary and to punish those responsible.

From Gabriele de' Mussis (d. 1356), a Lawyer in Piacenza

In 1346, in the countries of the East, countless numbers of Tartars and Saracens were struck down by a mysterious illness which brought sudden death. . . . An eastern settlement under the rule of the Tartars called Tana, which lay to the north of Constantinople and was much frequented by Italian merchants, was totally abandoned after an incident there which led to its being besieged and attacked by hordes of Tartars who gathered in a short space of time. The Christian merchants, who had been driven out by force, were so terrified of the power of the Tartars that, to save themselves and their belongings, they fled in an armed ship to Caffa, a settlement in the same part of the world which had been founded long ago by the Genoese.

Oh God! See how the heathen Tartar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly invested the city of Caffa and besieged the trapped Christians there for almost three years. There, hemmed in by an immense army, they could hardly draw breath, although food could be shipped in, which offered them some hope. But behold, the whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tartars and killed thousands upon thousands every day. It was as though arrows were raining down from heaven to strike and crush the Tartars' arrogance. All medical advice and attention was useless; the Tartars died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies: swellings in the armpit or groin caused by coagulating humors, followed by a putrid fever.

The dying Tartars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. What seemed like mountains of dead were thrown into the city, and the Christians could not hide or flee or escape from them, although they dumped as many of the bodies as they could in the sea. And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tartar army. Moreover, one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could discover, a means of defense.

Thus almost everyone who had been in the East, or in the regions to the south and north, fell victim to sudden death after contracting this pestilential disease, as if struck by a lethal arrow which raised a tumor on their bodies. The scale of the mortality and the form which it took persuaded those who lived, weeping and lamenting, through the bitter events of 1346 to 1348—the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Cilicians, Georgians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens and Greeks (for almost all the East has been affected) that the last judgment had come. . . .
As it happened, among those who escaped from Caffa by boat were a few sailors who had been infected with the poisonous disease. Some boats were bound for Genoa, others went to Venice and to other Christian areas. When the sailors reached these places and mixed with the people there, it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence. . . .

Scarcely one in seven of the Genoese survived. In Venice, where an inquiry was held into the mortality, it was found that more than 70 percent of the people had died, and that within a short period 20 out of 24 excellent physicians had died. The rest of Italy, Sicily and Apulia and the neighboring regions maintain that they have been virtually emptied of inhabitants. The people of Florence, Pisa and Lucca, finding themselves bereft of their fellow residents, emphasize their losses. The Roman Curia at Avignon, the provinces on both sides of the Rhône, Spain, France, and the Empire cry up their griefs and disasters — all of which makes it extraordinarily difficult for me to give an accurate picture.

By contrast, what befell the Saracens can be established from trustworthy accounts. In the city of Babylon alone (the heart of the Sultan's power), 480,000 of his subjects are said to have been carried off by the disease in less than three months in 1348 — and this is known from the Sultan's register which records the names of the dead, because he receives a gold bezant for each person buried. . . .

I am overwhelmed, I can't go on. Everywhere one turns there is death and bitterness to be described. The hand of the Almighty strikes repeatedly, to greater and greater effect. The terrible judgment gains power as time goes by.

**From Herman Gigas, a Franciscan Friar in Germany, Whose Account Goes until 1349**

In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world that in the opinion of well-informed men scarcely a tenth of mankind survived. The victims did not linger long, but died on the second or third day. . . . Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that theews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. . . . [M]en say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs.

**From Heinrich Truchess, a Former Papal Chaplain and Canon of Constance**

The persecution of the Jews began in November 1348, and the first outbreak in Germany was at Sölden, where all the Jews were burnt on the strength of a rumor that they had poisoned wells and rivers, as was afterwards confirmed by their own confessions and also by the confessions of Christians whom they had corrupted. . . . Within the revolution of one year, that is from All Saints [1 November]
1348 until Michaelmas [29 September] 1349 all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt and killed for this crime, young men and maidens and the old along with the rest. And blessed be God who confounded the ungodly who were plotting the extinction of his church.

Papal Bull Sicut Judeis of Clement VI Issued in July 1348

Recently, however, it has been brought to our attention by public fame — or more accurately, infamy — that numerous Christians are blaming the plague with which God, provoked by their sins, has afflicted the Christian people, on poisonings carried out by the Jews at the instigation of the devil, and that out of their own hot-headedness they have impiously slain many Jews, making no exception for age or sex; and that the Jews have been falsely accused of such outrageous behavior. . . . It cannot be true that the Jews, by such a heinous crime, are the cause or occasion of the plague, because throughout many parts of the world the same plague, by the hidden judgment of God, has afflicted and afflicts the Jews themselves and many other races who have never lived alongside them.

We order you by apostolic writing that each of you upon whom this charge has been laid, should strictly command those subject to you, both clerical and lay . . . not to dare (on their own authority or out of hot-headedness) to capture, strike, wound or kill any Jews or expel them from their service on these grounds; and you should demand obedience under pain of excommunication.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What explanations do these documents offer for the onset of plague? What do they suggest about the extent of Europeans' understanding of the disease and how it spread?

2. What strategies did the city of Pistoia adopt to prevent the spread of infection? How did those strategies differ from the ones described by Herman Gigas and Heinrich Truchsess?

3. What do the accounts by Mussis and the bull of Pope Clement VI have in common? How did different groups of people react to the plague?

2.

Crisis and Change

Thomas Walsingham, Peasant Rebels in London (1381)

Thomas Walsingham (d. 1422) was the Benedictine author of six chronicles, including a portion of the famous "St. Alban’s Chronicle." Although little is known of his life, his description of the Peasants' Revolt is a riveting and, by the standards of the time, reliable account of events early in the reign of King Richard II (r. 1377–1399).

The revolt, one of the largest of its kind, was a response to noble demands on a population experiencing declining incomes as a result of the Black Death, the costs of war with France, and the realm's poor administration. The poll tax imposed on adult males in 1380 sparked a rebellion, led by Wat Tyler (d. 1381) and preacher John Ball, of townsmen and peasants in southeastern England. The larger causes can be found in the final breakdown of serfdom — a breakdown vigorously opposed by a nobility in decline and supported by a peasantry with new opportunities brought about by the scarcity of laborers.

On the next day [Corpus Christi] the rebels went in and out of London and talked with the simple commons of the city about the acquiring of liberty and the seizure of the traitors, especially the duke of Lancaster whom they hated most of all; and in a short time easily persuaded all the poorer citizens to support them in their conspiracy. And when, later that day, the sun had climbed higher and grown warm and the rebels had tasted various wines and expensive drinks at will and so had become less drunk than mad (for the great men and common people of London had left all their cellars open to the rebels), they began to debate at length about the traitors with the more simple men of the city. Among other things they assembled and set out for the Savoy, the residence of the duke of Lancaster, unrivaled in splendor and nobility within England, which they then set to the flames... This news so delighted the common people of London that, thinking it particularly shameful for others to harm and injure the duke before themselves, they immediately ran there like madmen, set fire to the place on all sides and so destroyed it. In order that the whole community of the realm should know that they were not motivated by avarice, they made a proclamation that no one should retain for his own use any object found there under penalty of execution. Instead they broke the gold and silver vessels, of which there were many at the Savoy, into pieces with their axes and threw them into the Thames or the sewers. They tore the golden cloths and silk hangings to pieces and crushed them underfoot; they ground up rings and other jewels inlaid with precious stones in small mortars, so that they could never be used again... .

After these malicious deeds, the rebels destroyed the place called the “Temple Bar” (in which the more noble apprentices of the law lived) because of their anger... and there many muniments which the lawyers were keeping in custody were consumed by fire. Even more insanely they set fire to the noble house of the Hospital of St. John at Clerkenwell so that it burnt continuously for the next seven days... .

For who would ever have believed that such rustics, and most inferior ones at that, would dare (not in crowds but individually) to enter the chamber of the king and of his mother with their filthy sticks; and undeterred by any of the soldiers, to stroke and lay their uncouth and sordid hands on the beards of several most noble knights. Moreover, they conversed familiarly with the soldiers asking them to be faithful to the ribalds and friendly in the future... [They] gained access singly and in groups to the rooms in the Tower, they arrogantly lay and sat on the king’s bed while joking; and several asked the king’s mother to kiss them... . The rebels, who had formerly belonged to the most lowly condition of serf, went in and out like lords; and swineherds set themselves above soldiers... .
When the archbishop finally heard the rebels coming, he said to his men with great fortitude: "Let us go with confidence, for it is better to die when it can no longer help to live. At no previous time of my life could I have died in such security of conscience." A little later the executioners entered crying, "Where is that traitor to the kingdom? Where the despoiler of the common people?" . . . [They] dragged the archbishop along the passages by his arms and hood to their fellows once outside the gates on Tower Hill. . . . Words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks. . . .

Scarcely could the archbishop finish [his] speech before the rebels broke out with the horrible shout that they feared neither an interdict nor the Pope; all that remained for him, as a man false to the community and treasonable to the realm was to submit his neck to the executioners' swords. The archbishop now realized that his death was imminent and inevitable. . . . He was first struck severely but not fatally in the neck. He put his hand to the wound and said: "Ah! Ah! this is the hand of God." As he did not move his hand from the place of sorrow the second blow cut off the top of his fingers as well as severing part of the arteries. But the archbishop still did not die, and only on the eighth blow, wretchedly wounded in the neck and on the head, did he complete what we believe is worthy to be called his martyrdom. . . .

Nor did they show any reverence to any holy places but killed those whom they hated even if they were within churches and in sanctuary. I have heard from a trustworthy witness that thirty Flemings were violently dragged out of the church of the Austin Friars in London and executed in the open street. . . .

On the next day, Saturday 15 June (the feasts of Saints Vitus and Modestus), behold, the men of Kent showed themselves no less persistent in their wicked actions than on the previous day: they continued to kill men and to burn and destroy houses. The king sent messengers to the Kentishmen telling them that their fellows had left to live in peace henceforward and promising that he would give them too a similar form of peace if they would accept it. The rebels' greatest leader was called "Walter Helier" or "Tyler" (for such names had been given to him because of his trade), a cunning man endowed with much sense if he had decided to apply his intelligence to good purposes. . . .

On this the king, although a boy and of tender age, took courage and ordered the mayor of London to arrest Tyler. The mayor, a man of incomparable spirit and bravery, arrested Tyler without question and struck him a blow on the head which hurt him badly. Tyler was soon surrounded by the other servants of the king and pierced by sword thrusts in several parts of his body. His death, as he fell from his horse to the ground, was the first incident to restore to the English knighthood their almost extinct hope that they could resist the commons. . . .

But the king, with marvelous presence of mind and courage for so young a man, spurred his horse towards the commons and rode around them, saying, "What is this, my men? What are you doing? Surely you do not wish to fire on your own king? Do not attack me and do not regret the death of that traitor and ruffian. For I will be your king, your captain, and your leader. Follow me into the field where you can have all the things you would like to ask for." . . .
The commons were allowed to spend the night under the open sky. However the king ordered that the written and sealed charter which they had requested should be handed to them in order to avoid more trouble at that time. He knew that Essex was not yet pacified nor Kent settled; and the commons and rustics of both counties were ready to rebel if he failed to satisfy them quickly. . . .

Once they had this charter, the commons returned to their homes. But still the earlier evils by no means ceased.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. How does Thomas Walsingham's class and position affect his recording of events? How does he describe the different classes of society?

2. What does the account suggest about economic and political conditions in late-fourteenth-century England?

3. How did the rebels choose their targets, both human and material? What were they seeking? Against what were they protesting?

4. What was the rebels' attitude toward religious authority? What might explain their actions in this regard?

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3.

**Satirizing the Church**

**Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Pardoner’s Prologue* (1387–1400)**

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400) wore many hats in his native England: soldier, diplomat, customs official, and politician. Yet it was his talent as a poet deeply in tune with pressing social and religious issues that gained him fame. In the late fourteenth century, he composed one of the great works of world literature, *The Canterbury Tales*, in Middle English. Here he claims to narrate the story of thirty pilgrims who embark on a journey to Thomas Becket’s shrine at Canterbury. Each pilgrim is supposed to tell two stories to pass the time. The men and women, collectively representing most social classes and professions of the day, tell tales that are bawdy parodies of society, religion, and gender roles. Yet, at the same time, the stories also provide shrewd insights into human behavior and social evils. The following tale, told by the Pardoner, a medieval indulgence preacher, represents the worst of religion at a time of crisis in the church. Known as the Great Schism (1378–1417), two men claimed their right to the papacy, sparking increasingly vocal calls for reform. The Pardoner personified what many Christians regarded as the clergy’s failings. Instead of using his preaching skills to teach the Christian life, the Pardoner is a con artist and hypocrite who willingly deceives to enrich himself and to eat well — two of Catholic Christianity’s deadly sins: avarice and gluttony.

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