



**Ole J. Benedictow.** *The Complete History of the Black Death*. Melton: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated, 2021. 1058 pp. \$165.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78327-516-8.

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**Published on** H-Environment (February, 2022)

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Ole J. Benedictow's *The Complete History of the Black Death* is a career-defining book. It is a massive and substantial update of his 2004 book (by the same press), *The Black Death 1346-1353: A Complete History*, which has been a staple on the shelves of scholars researching and teaching the history of plague and epidemic disease since its release. This book is an expansion rather than a revision of the 2004 book. As such, readers familiar with that first book will find little of surprise here, but those who use it for research or teaching will nonetheless want to replace the former with this expanded version.

This is a very big book. *The Complete History* (2021) clocks in at 1,026 pages including a massive 74-page bibliography. *The Black Death* was 433 pages. Benedictow figuratively and literally doubles down on the claims he made in the first volume, expanding most chapters with new data, footnotes, and resources, but changing none of his core arguments. His main argument is that careful and exhaustive collection and analysis of medieval data can be used to track the routes by which the pathogen of bubonic plague and its host organisms (the black rat and the rat flea) spread through Europe, with catastrophic results.

*The Complete History* begins with a list of maps, figures, and tables that leads one to expect a densely illustrated book. For reasons that are not

clear to me, he then includes the preface to the same path as the 2004 book. This is followed by an author's note on the revised edition, that includes a new discussion of the paleo-genetic evidence that has recently confirmed the bubonic plague was the microbe that caused the Black Death. This is useful, but it makes me wonder why this was not expanded and integrated into part 1. Here Benedictow also quickly dismisses scholars who continue to argue for other pathogens. Finally, the front matter also includes a useful and expanded glossary.

In the first major part of the work (chapters 1-8), "What Was the Black Death?," Benedictow argues that the pathogen at work in the Black Death was bubonic plague and that it was rat- and rat flea-borne, and that the life cycles and ecologies of rat colonies are key to the pace by which the disease entered human populations. He also discusses the processes of plague transmission, addresses the issue of pneumonic plague, surveys the epidemiology of bubonic plague, and discusses the disease's seasonality. This section is clearly written and avoids jargon, and it would be very useful for all those working to explain the dynamics of the disease to students.

Part 2 is a stand-alone section, with a single chapter entitled "A Short History of Plague before the Black Death." This is a new feature, and one

that does not do much to propel the book forward. Though I understand the desire to include more information on the first pandemic, it may have made more sense to integrate some of this section into the previous one, where the third pandemic already features. The section ends, oddly, with a discussion of the end of the second plague pandemic in 1644 in China, and a section on the plague in India to 1800, further underscoring the odd organization of a chapter allegedly on precursors to the fourteenth-century plague.

In part 3, Benedictow focuses on the first of his stated “central objectives”: “to produce a thorough description of the spread of Black Death across Europe and adjacent parts of the Old World” (p. 13). He assembles a country-by-country discussion of the spread of plague. He uses a set of information drawn from literary, normative, and historical sources that emphasizes tracing the chronological spread of the disease. Those familiar with the first book will recognize much of the text; in *The Complete History* he has helpfully added subsections, making the dense text in the longer chapters much more navigable. Throughout these sections, he argues for an intermittent spread of the disease along multiple human trade and communication routes, particularly those of the grain trade.

Here it is important to note the inclusion of several new regions and changes since the 2004 book. He has expanded the chapter on Germany to include the Teutonic realms, given Poland and Bohemia their own chapters (though the Bohemia chapter is largely an attack on a single scholar and not very useful), and separated Britain and Ireland into their own chapters. He still includes a chapter on regions that may have escaped the Black Death, but he now is certain that Bohemia and Poland are not among that rare group. Instead, he argues that only three areas escaped, due to their small populations and limited external contacts (p. 616): Greenland, Iceland, and Finland.

Part 4, “Mortality in the Black Death” is where Benedictow pursues his second major goal in this work, namely “to bring together all studies of mortality suitable for estimation of mortality rates, consider them in the light of demography and estimate the mortality effects” (p. 13). Assembling the data, which, after prefatory chapters on medieval demographic systems and the methods used to understand them is again organized country by country, he makes the case for an overall mortality rate of ca. 65 percent for Europe. He assembles over 300 “local, individual mortality estimates” (up from 194 in the first version). His new analysis of this expanded data set leads him to the same conclusion that “surprised and stunned” (p. 650) readers of his first book: over 60 percent of the people in affected parts of Europe died during the Black Death from 1346-53. The additional evidence generated by many scholars during the last fifteen years and again compiled in this book, Benedictow argues, has “strengthened the tenability and realism of the estimates in the first edition, while also confirming the view that the estimate of a general mortality rate in the Black Death of 60 percent was cautious and on the low side” (p. 869).

I used to think that this argument about mortality rate and Benedictow’s vociferous defense of the idea of the rat flea contagion pattern would always be my main take-aways from the book. But this time (perhaps because I had already been largely persuaded by the first book?), I was much more attuned to the ways Benedictow described his own objectives—that his goals are to 1) “produce a thorough description” and 2) “bring together all studies.” This is a work of exhaustive compilation and explication, and it reveals the depth of Benedictow’s dedication to this field. It also makes me very curious about how his research was organized and conducted over multiple decades.

The bibliography alone makes this book a valuable resource for scholars of the medieval plague. It contains not only full references to works of scholars of plague since the 1800s but

also has added numerous publications written since 2004 and citations to primary sources newly available online. Unfortunately, it mingles primary and secondary resources and does not make any attempt to divide the works by topic or geography, which would have made it more navigable as a free-standing tool, though admittedly harder to find full references while reading, though the chapters have full footnotes. Many of Benedictow's updates to his sense of the state of the field and the changing nature of research and source access, et cetera come in his footnotes rather than the body of the text. I understand the efficacy of using notes to discuss changes in historiography since the 2004 book, but it does highlight the many ways in which his own arguments, frameworks, interpretations, and even turns of phrase remain unchanged.

This book has replaced the first, but in a way it as if new pages and information have been interleaved into the old book. He has kept almost *all* of the text of the 2004 book. For the vast majority of the book he has revised practically nothing, only adding new evidence and data. This is not nothing—the 2021 book has an incredible and astounding amount of new data, and absolutely replaces the old one. But it is an expansion, not a revision. There are no signs anywhere that Benedictow has changed his own mind about any aspect of the previous book.

And this is not surprising, once a reader spends time in the footnotes and citations, as Benedictow is very defensive of his previous works (he cites twenty-six of them, all seemingly single-authored), to the point of seeming to wish to avoid any and all critique. It must also be noted that Benedictow writes aggressively and derisively about scholars whose work he disagrees with, and, more problematically, scholars who have disagreed with him. He seems unable to deal well with criticism from the new guard, and he is unfailingly critical of anyone who deviates from the narrative that he has advocated since the 2004 edition. By the end of

the book, I was very frustrated with the tone and nature of such engagements. This is not the treatment of other scholars and their work and ideas that I expect from a senior scholar in what is clearly their magnum opus.

Despite the fact that the tone, tenor, and argument of the book do not change, I found reading this book during COVID to be very different from the last time that I seriously engaged with the 2004 book. Though the timing of the book and Benedictow's narrow focus on bubonic plague mean that COVID does not appear in the pages, it underlay my entire experience of reading this book. This was a rich and exhausting reading experience. It reminded me much less of reading a disease history, and much more of poring over the modern COVID data sets available from agencies and news outlets. What Benedictow has done (twice!) in his work of assembly resembles the work that contemporary epidemiologists are doing in compiling and making legible the massive amounts of data on contagion, transmission, national stats, et cetera. It is an incredible feat of research, organization, collation, and data extraction.

This book helped me connect to medieval people (and medieval chroniclers) in new and surprising ways—not through the individual stories that he sporadically includes, but in the sheer exhaustion of reading about town after town, state after state, community after community. The repetition in the pattern, and, to be frank, in Benedictow's writing (the first time the plague is described as a “mind-stretching” disease it is intriguing; by the end of the book my eyes practically skipped over the phrase), creates an unrelenting, almost numbing effect. As a reader, I found myself wading slowly through this overwhelming amassing of evidence of the density of the experience of sickness, death, and loss that Europe experienced in the seven years of the Black Death, and newly attuned to how traumatic slow, constant, steady loss can be.

I am exhausted by COVID, and I am relatively safe from its effects. I have access to health care, I have received a vaccine developed by a scientific medical system I largely trust, I have an understanding of many of the biological and sociological factors that are shaping the pandemic, and thanks to modern communications and epidemiology, I can understand and assess risk and start to wrap my head around the logistics of the pandemic. I can only shudder to imagine the world of the medieval pandemic, when all of this information that Benedictow has assembled on the spread, patterns, logistic, timing, scope, and duration was logistically impossible to acquire (or even to imagine). How terrifying, numbing, confusing, and impossibly incomprehensible this experience must have been.

For those who use Benedictow's work regularly, it's time to update. For medievalists who do not, it may be worth your time to read part 1 and engage with his chapters from parts 3 and 4 that deal with the region you study. For environmental historians and historians of disease and disaster, taking the time to engage with part 4, which focuses on medieval mortality, will be illustrative of the severity of the disease in the medieval experience; even if other scholars may still disagree with some of his analysis, the overwhelming shock of the plague mortality is present throughout the chapters. Part 4 also highlights the tricky nature of decoding and deciphering medieval demography and of asking modern epidemiological questions from sources generated by premodern bureaucracies.

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**Citation:** Ellen Arnold. Review of Benedictow, Ole J. *The Complete History of the Black Death*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. February, 2022.

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