

BOOK REVIEW

The Black Death: A Global History of Humanity's Most Devastating Pandemic *by Thomas Asbridge*

Hardback, 424 pages
Allen Lane
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Thomas Asbridge, Reader in Medieval History at Queen Mary University of London, offers an ambitious and highly accessible account of the fourteenth-century Black Death and of subsequent plague pandemics. Rather than presenting the Black Death as primarily a European catastrophe, he emphasizes its wider geographical context, tracing its origins in Central Asia and following its spread along the Silk Road to Crimea, Venice, Western Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. This global perspective is the book's principal contribution and distinguishes it from many earlier popular histories of the subject.

Asbridge's organising principle is to combine large-scale historical analysis with what he terms "micro-histories" of individuals who lived through the pandemic. Drawing on hundreds of contemporary eyewitness accounts, wills, chronicles and letters, he reconstructs the experiences of rulers, merchants, clerics and ordinary families confronting a disease that may have killed more than 100 million people. Particularly memorable are the stories of individuals such as Princess Joan of England and the many lesser-known victims whose personal tragedies illuminate the human dimension of the disaster.

For historians of medicine, the book sits at the intersection of infectious disease epidemiology, social history and global history. It incorporates recent scientific evidence, including studies of ancient DNA from plague victims in Smithfield Cemetery confirming *Yersinia pestis* as the causative organism, while also exploring contemporary understandings of disease, religious perceptions of divine punishment, and early public health measures such as quarantine and travel restrictions. Asbridge also covers the discovery of the plague bacillus in 1890s Hong Kong.

The book's greatest strengths are its readability, breadth of coverage and extensive use of eyewitness testimony to convey the scale and terror of the pandemic. In seeking comprehensive coverage though, some themes such as microbiology and epidemiology details receive necessarily brief treatment.

Overall, Asbridge succeeds in his aim of presenting the Black Death as a truly global event and in making complex scholarship accessible to a wide readership. This is a well written book for general readers, students, public health professionals, and medical historians seeking an up-to-date synthesis of current scholarship. For anyone interested in the historical impact of epidemic disease, it is both informative and compelling.

Robert Orford
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