The Black Death and the Rise of the Ottomans

News of the epidemic that would become the Black Death and the havoc it had wreaked in the East began to reach Florence in the late months of 1347. In the face of an impending disaster, the city took measures to halt the spread of the disease, which nonetheless broke out in March of 1348. As Boccaccio explained:

All the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing. Large quantities of refuse were cleared out of the city by officials specially appointed for the purpose, all sick persons were forbidden entry, and numerous instructions were issued for safeguarding the people's health, but all to no avail. Nor were the countless petitions humbly directed to God by the pious, whether by means of formal processions or in any other guise, any less ineffectual.[1]

The city's move to protect its inhabitants from disaster, and the various precautions taken by the latter, including confinement, flight, or both, marked a departure from past practice in European society. That God and the church should play a minor role in Boccaccio's account of the plague is not surprising: This Renaissance humanist was inspired more by antiquity and the Roman legacy than by the church. Still, his description leaves little doubt that times were changing. This was seen in the preparations for future epidemics – the introduction of quarantines, legislation regarding public hygiene – and in the intellectual discourse that sought explanations for the eruption of diseases and other natural blows beyond the supernatural.

[1] Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1972), 50. For early advances of the Black Death in Italy, see Benedictow, *Black Death*, 91–5.

The Black Death that decimated a third to two-thirds of the population in Europe[2] also contributed to many of the social, economic, and political changes there between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and beyond. The epidemic that ravaged the continent from 1347 onward arrived from East Asia and, on the way, inflicted death and damage on the Middle East as well.[3] But the social and political upheavals it effected in Europe had no parallel in the Muslim lands. This chapter will raise the question why this was so: why changes of the kind that occurred in one society did not take place in the other, despite both being subject to the wrath of the forces of nature similarly. To probe this matter, I will first examine the history of reactions to natural disasters in the Muslim world up to the Black Death,[4] then look at social changes that took place in Christendom and Islam after that cataclysmic epidemic. As we shall see, the differences between the two societies were, to a large extent, the result of long-term processes that had been already under way in Europe – but not in the Middle East – prior to the Black Death, which the Black Death had accelerated. Finally, although the consequences of the Black Death in the Middle East were in many ways milder, the chapter will argue that overall the plague played a major role in molding the region's history in one important respect: It facilitated the rise of the Ottomans. It was the Ottomans who introduced an inclusive political and religious culture to the region, one that was relatively open to new ideas, such as in the realm of disaster prevention and containment.

NATURAL DISASTERS IN MUSLIM SOCIETIES BEFORE THE OTTOMANS

Natural disasters in the pre-Ottoman Middle East and people's responses to them left little historical evidence. Beyond dates, and anecdotal references to the outcomes of some of them, notably epidemics, we are left for

---

[2] For the problematic of determining the death toll, see Benedictow, *Black Death*, 380–4.

[3] Beyond Dols and Borsch's books mentioned previously, a few works have discussed the effects of the Black Death on Islamic society: Adam Sabra, *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 121–68; William Tucker, "Natural disasters and the peasantry in Mamlūk Egypt," *JESHO* **24** (1981), 2:215–24; David Ayalon, "Regarding population estimates in the countries of medieval Islam," *JESHO* **28** (1985), 1:1–19; and Avner Gil'adi, "'The child was small … not so the grief for him': Sources, structure, and content of al-Sakhawi's consolation treatise for bereaved parents," *Poetics Today* **14** (1993), 2:367–86.

[4] For reactions to disasters in Christendom prior to the Black Death, see the Introduction, "Natural Disasters in Human Record."

the most part in the dark.[5] This dearth of data stands in contrast to the plethora of theoretical discussions on various natural phenomena, again, mostly on epidemics, by local authors. One should use caution, however, when relying on such works as sources for actual history, as the link between theory and reality could be merely circumstantial. For example, it is hard to tell to what extent Muslim treatises on plague reflected popular perceptions and practices regarding disease and death. Before the late-nineteenth century, Middle Eastern societies were overwhelmingly illiterate, and the discourse among local scholars involved no more than a small circle of intellectuals trained in ruminating over past and contemporary scholarship. Muslim authors echoed the values and beliefs of those belonging to that circle, but not necessarily ideals shared by the larger public. Even manuscripts copied in relatively large numbers (a possible indication of their popularity, in a society without printing) still reached a very limited audience.

Still, the authors of tracts and treatises did not live in a vacuum. In medieval and early modern Muslim societies, being literate signified one's belonging to a class that enjoyed more opportunities. If literary interactions were confined to an exclusive circle, Muslim scholars were also members of their society. They lived in cities, walked their streets, went to mosques, spent time in coffeehouses and the markets, and even traveled to other towns and countries. Their writings must have been informed by their personal experiences and social interactions as much as by the scholarship they read. It is also likely that their works on plague (and other natural phenomena) reached ordinary people through mosque sermons, street talks, and similar channels of public communication. Such popular exposure to written information was obviously partial, without the intricacies of the argument in the written tracts. A simplified version of the existing wisdom thus circulated orally and, with time, became part of a common cumulative knowledge, which people accepted as authoritative. One may therefore use religious, medical, and scientific texts with due caution as general indications of popular trends that may not otherwise be recovered, in medieval and early modern society.

The first natural disaster Muslims confronted was the Plague of 'Amwas, an epidemic that erupted in 639, seven years after the death of Muḥammad; it was followed by famine. Named after a village in Palestine, the plague and famine hit areas from Syria to Arabia. It spread

---

[5] The situation is somewhat better for Egypt in the Mamluk period, as the studies of Dols, Borsch, and Sabra demonstrate.

while the Arab Muslims led by the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab (d. 644), were consolidating their rule in the area, having conquered Syria and Palestine in the 630s. The Plague of 'Amwas required the Muslim community (*umma*) to address the question of right behavior under such challenging circumstances. The foundations for considering the issue were laid during an earlier, smaller epidemic in Syria. 'Umar and a group of his followers were on their way from Medina to Syria, when they met Abu 'Ubayda (commander of the Muslim armies and a companion of the Prophet; d. 638), who informed them that a plague was raging in Syria. After consulting his aides, 'Umar decided to return to Medina. Abu 'Ubayda challenged the caliph's decision, arguing that interrupting the mission was tantamount to running away from God. 'Umar replied that he was merely running from the will of God to the will of God. This tradition, as related by al-Bukhari, ends with a quote of the Prophet Muḥammad: If hearing that plague "is in a land, do not approach it; but if it occurs in a land while you are there, do not leave to escape it." This anecdote (its historical authenticity immaterial) established the general rule that authors of later plague treatises adopted: One should avoid entering a plague-stricken city, but should not try to flee from it if already there.[6]

Although 'Umar's decision was congruent with the Prophet's guidelines, his return to Medina inspired a centuries-long debate among Muslim authors and Christian scholars living in Muslim lands regarding the right response to plagues and other diseases, such as leprosy. Of utmost importance was the question of contagion: If a disease could be transmitted from one person to another, there should be a way to prevent it, and if so, the argument that epidemics were a divine punishment for man's sins would be hard to sustain. Muslim scholars managed to reconcile the two approaches by suggesting that, even though contagion existed, it was God's decision whether or not a person would become ill. Most works on the subject, however, argued for either the existence or nonexistence of contagion and, consequently, whether one should or should not flee a plague-stricken area.

---

[6] Lawrence Conrad, "The plague in the early medieval Near East" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1981), 170–2 (quotation of al-Bukhari from 172). Other Muslim authors who quote this story are Hibat Allah ibn al-Ḥasan al-Lalaka'i, *Sharḥ uṣul iʻtiqad ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamaʻa* (Riyadh: Dar Ṭiba, 1994), 4:655 and ʻAli ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ʻAsakir, *Ta'rikh madinat dimashq* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 2:170. For the development of this tradition in later generations, see Josef Van Ess, *Der Fehltritt des Gelehrten: Die "Pest von Emmaus" und ihre theologischen Nachspiele* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2001), 241–6.

In his recent study, Justin Stearns has shown that the general attitude of Muslim authors to the question of contagion changed over the centuries. Most ninth- and tenth-century authors whose treatises are extant acknowledged the transmission of diseases among humans.[7] Later, during the period from the tenth century to the Black Death, scholars debated and sometimes tried to support both approaches – for and against contagion. It was a complex dilemma, best exemplified in the writings of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350). Ibn al-Qayyim maintained that God produced the plague through an imbalance of the spirits, but also that plague was the result of bad air, miasma. He accepted the principle that one should neither enter nor flee a plague-ridden area, yet when trying to explain why such behavior was necessary he faced the difficulties of consolidating the prophetic tradition with Greek medicine: One was not to flee the plague because of trust in God, but also because of doctors' belief that plague conditions weakened the human body and movement would make one more susceptible to the disease. Ibn al-Qayyim explained that both approaches, trusting in God and believing in contagion, were valid and could work well for different people. He whose belief was deep enough could repel contagion; he whose faith was weak had no choice but fearing it.[8] The acceptance of the two seemingly contradictory premises also appeared in the writings of Christians residing in the Muslim world, such as Ibn Sahl b. Rabban al-Ṭabari (d. after 855) and Qusṭa ibn Luqa (d. c. 920). The latter wrote a book on the question of contagion, where he admitted it was a controversial issue. [9]

For Stearns, the Black Death marks a turning point in the attitude of Muslim and Christian scholars toward plague. Some scholars of the generation that experienced the Black Death objected to the notion of contagion; by the fifteenth century contagion was hardly an accepted concept. The work of Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalani (d. 1448), who denied contagion, inspired Muslim scholars as far away as Spain. A respected and widely read scholar, Ibn Ḥajar was largely responsible for the intellectual shift that changed the balance between supporters and deniers of contagion in favor of the latter. Stearns then speculates that these attitudes would remain essentially unchanged until the nineteenth century.[10]

---

[7] Stearns, *Infectious Ideas*, 69–72.
[8] Ibid., 74–6.
[9] Ibid., 70–1.
[10] Ibid., 85–9. Stearns admits in a footnote that the period after Ibn Ḥajar lies outside the scope of his book, even though he is certain that a future study would point to the same conclusion (n. 85, p. 86).

The writings of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuṭi (d. 1505) seem to vindicate Stearns's assumption. Al-Suyuṭi, one of the most prolific authors in Muslim history, lived in Egypt during the closing years of the Mamluk sultanate. He wrote hundreds of works on diverse topics, from Qur'an and *ḥadith* to geography, lexicography, and medicine, and issued numerous religious rulings. His works were copied time and again and later printed in numerous editions.[11] As plague was a frequent visitor to Mamluk Egypt, al-Suyuṭi wrote a tract on the origins, transmission, and appropriate responses to plague. His *ma rawahu al-wa'un fi akhbar al-ṭa'un* is an abridged and annotated version of Ibn Ḥajar's main opus on the plague, *badhl al-ma'un fi fadl al-ṭa'un*.[12] Ibn Ḥajar was one of al-Suyuṭi's admired scholars of the previous generation. Al-Suyuṭi's reiteration of Ibn Ḥajar's ideas on plague must have had a great effect, at least among the educated classes in Egypt and the Muslim world. In *ma rawahu*, al-Suyuṭi accepted Ibn Ḥajar's premises. He equated dying from plague with a martyr's death in battle, and insisted both the one who survived plague and the one who succumbed to it would be rewarded. Al-Suyuṭi condemned flight from plague, arguing that the most prominent of the Prophet's companions disavowed 'Amr ibn al-'As (d. 664) for his flight from a plague in Syria.[13] In a small section on the possibility of plague occurrence in Mecca and Medina, he further underscored his rejection of the idea of contagion. Citing several prophetic traditions on the issue, he concluded with a quote of the Prophet: "Al-Madina and Makka are surrounded by angels; there is an angel at every gate, and the impostors and the plague cannot enter."[14]

Given al-Suyuṭi's view of plague as divine action from which one cannot and should not try to escape, one would expect him to have held similar views on other disasters. But al-Suyuṭi's message was not as clear when considering earthquakes. One of the few treatises specifically devoted to the issue, his *kashf al-ṣalṣala 'an waṣf al-zalzala* is an account of earthquakes in Muslim history with a discussion of why they happened and what one should do when they hit. His advice on avoiding earthquakes stemmed mostly from his belief that they, like plagues, represented God's angry response to human misdeeds.[15] Accordingly, he recommended

[11] For more on al-Suyuṭi, see E. Geoffroy, "Al-Suyūṭī," *EI²*, 9:913–16.

[12] This text has been published in numerous editions. I have used Jalal al-Din al-Suyuṭi, *Ma rawahu al-wa'un fi akhbar al-ṭa'un* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 1997). Al-Suyuṭi explains the source of his work on 137.

[13] Ibid., 152–4.

[14] Ibid., 160.

[15] This is seen in his discussion of the quakes the Prophet and the second caliph, 'Umar, had experienced; Jalal al-Din al-Suyuṭi, *Kashf al-ṣalṣala 'an waṣf al-zalzala* (Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1987), 146–7.

sermons and prayers, such as *ṣalat al-kusuf* (a prayer recited during solar eclipse), fasting every Monday and Thursday, and offering charity.[16] But what if disaster strikes – if an earthquake hits or is about to hit people's house – are they to flee the place? Here al-Suyuṭi was less unequivocal than with regard to the plague. He referred to a question that had been sent to him, about whether one could use an impending earthquake as an excuse to desert a group or leave the Friday prayer; his response had been that he had found no one in the sources who objected to such conduct, yet the matter deserved further investigation.[17] He then added a quotation from a Ḥanafi jurist, one Qaḍi Ḥan, who dealt with the question of leaving one's home for a nearby field when an earthquake hit. Qaḍi Ḥan had ruled that, on the basis of examples set by the Prophet, this was permissible even though many people condemned the practice.[18] Al-Suyuṭi did not state his view on that last point, and we may assume that he was at least ambivalent toward, if not approving of, fleeing.

The gap between al-Suyuṭi's clear view on plagues and his somewhat-hesitant treatment of earthquakes – both of which he perceived to be caused by God – may have reflected the state of the sources on which he relied. As a textualist, al-Suyuṭi had much more to work with when considering plague, and epidemics in general. A rich Islamic tradition about plagues from the time of the Prophet to his own enabled him (and Ibn Ḥajar before him) to engage in a scholarly debate with past authors. No such rich literature seems to have existed for earthquakes or other natural phenomena. Apparently al-Suyuṭi, like most authors from the Black Death onward, rejected the idea of contagion and, more broadly, of people's ability to change their fate by taking measures against plague. This approach does not disappear in his work on earthquakes, but since al-Suyuṭi found no direct reference to other disasters in the Muslim sources, he had to express a less decisive view.[19]

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century authors writing in Arabic were, on the whole, averse to the idea that humans could do much to escape the harm of plague or other catastrophes, notwithstanding differences in

---

[16] Ibid., 146, 148, 151. A solar (*kusuf*) and a lunar *(khusuf)* eclipse were believed to be preliminary signs for a natural disaster or judgment day (Kamil Yaşaroğlu, "Küsûf," *TDVIA*, **26**:576–7). For similar recommendations for times of plague, see al-Suyuṭi, *Ma rawahu*, 167–77.

[17] al-Suyuṭi, *Kashf*, 154.

[18] Ibid., 154–5.

[19] Another explanation for the difference between plagues and earthquakes may lie in the simple fact that often an earthquake left one no choice but to move elsewhere, as his or her house was destroyed or burned down in subsequent fires.

their approaches to such disasters. As for the wider public, the extent to which the views of scholars became common knowledge is unclear. Prolific authors such as Ibn Ḥajar and al-Suyuṭī must have acquired influence through their teaching, and it is plausible that many people were familiar with their ideas. It might not be fanciful to assume, then, that Arab-Muslim society before the Ottoman conquest tended not to believe in contagion, was unresponsive to natural explanations of plagues and other disasters, and was therefore also opposed to fleeing. Did such perceptions, if true, inform people's action when disasters occurred? Not entirely. As research has already shown, disasters during the Mamluk period – extreme climatic events, diseases, famines – caused population depletion in many areas not merely through deaths but also as a result of migration, especially from rural areas to cities.[20] Dols described quite a few cases of dispersed populations during the Black Death, in Egypt, Syria, and Anatolia. In later epidemics, Dols found that even Mamluk sultans fled Cairo when the plague arrived. Fleeing, he suggested, was against social conventions of Muslim society, yet many chose it as an outlet.[21] This leads us to a central dilemma of this study: the gap between common beliefs about disasters and the ways people actually responded to them. Why there was such a discrepancy is a question that defies a simple answer. As I will argue, a multitude of social, economic, psychological, and even biological factors determined how people responded to life-threatening situations. Before delving into the dilemma, however, I must turn to the changes the Middle East underwent as a result of the Black Death.

THE BLACK DEATH AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Black Death originated from the Central Asian steppes, an area that was (and still is) a natural reservoir for plague.[22] From these regions it is believed to have spread east with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century into Burma and Yunnan, where it became endemic among rodent populations. Plague first erupted in China in 1331 and made cyclical appearances there throughout the fourteenth century. Especially severe were the epidemics that broke out from the early 1350s, during the rebellions and civil war that culminated in the collapse of the Mongol Yuan

---

[20] Tucker, "Natural disasters," 220–2.
[21] Dols, *Black Death*, 62, 169–75.
[22] Ibid., 35–9; Benedictow, *Black Death*, 44–54. Benedictow rejects the explanation that the plague of the mid-fourteenth century originated in China.

dynasty and the rise of the Ming (r. 1368–1644).[23] Concurrently, plague traveled westward, arriving in the Crimea in 1346 and in Constantinople in 1347. From there it spread into the Balkans, and via the Mediterranean and the Adriatic into Italy and the rest of Europe, and into the Middle East. It reached Sicily, Marseille, and Alexandria in 1347; and made its way north into Italy and France in 1348, the same year it reached Cairo, Tunis, and Damascus. From Damascus, the plague spread north into Anatolia and southeast into Mosul and Baghdad by 1349. It subsided in the Middle East by 1351, after the last outbreak took place in Yemen. In Europe, the Black Death manifested itself last in Russia in 1353.[24]

The Black Death and subsequent epidemics in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries devastated Europe and the Middle East demographically. Historians have estimated that in Europe from 1346 to 1353, the plague killed between a third and two-thirds of the continent's population, and that in some areas nearly 80 percent of the inhabitants perished.[25] Recurrence of plague, wars, and famines prevented Europe's population from recovering till much later, probably not before the early seventeenth century. In Normandy in the 1420s, for example, the population was at about a quarter of what it had been on the eve of the Black Death, and one finds similar patterns in England and Norway as well.[26] In the Middle East, we may assume comparable demographic patterns, although evidence does not permit assessments as detailed as those given for Europe. Dols, who searched Egyptian chronicles for data on the scope of mortality in Cairo during the Black Death, could offer little beyond the general assessment that a great percentage of the population had died. Even without knowing the overall size of the population, he suggested, one may assume that the Black Death eliminated the majority of inhabitants in cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, Damascus, and Aleppo. This appraisal derives from reports – no doubt exaggerated, yet indicative – by contemporary chroniclers, who calculated the number of deaths

[23] William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 141–3.
[24] Dols, *Black Death*, 36–7; Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 13–29.
[25] For the different estimations, see Benedictow, *Black Death*, 380–4; Robert Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 76; David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 18; and Samuel Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (London: Arnold, 2002), 2.
[26] William Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 296–7.

to be in the hundreds of thousands; from official records (*diwan*s) of casualties (even though they failed to register deaths among the poor and did not include children, the two groups most susceptible to the plague); and from the vast number of funeral processions observed in major cities, which reached hundreds daily. In rural areas, whole villages were deserted.[27] We may thus carefully assume that Black Death mortality, at least in Egypt and Syria, for which we have some crude data, was roughly akin to that of Europe in share of the total population.

The similarly sharp demographic decline in the Middle East and Europe should have had similar long-term implications for both societies. In some ways it indeed did. One important change historians have traced in both the Middle East and Europe was a shift from an agricultural-rural economy to an urban-centered one. It occurred in the two societies through different processes that led to similar end results. In Egypt, the death of farm animals and rural depopulation left large areas with inadequate labor to maintain crops and keep local irrigation canals (known as *baladi*) and dikes in working order. This meant that the Nile flood, which supplied water to Egypt's cultivated lands through a vast network of these canals, became harder to control. Egyptian historians who lived in the century and a half from the Black Death to the fall of the Mamluks, such as al-Maqrizi, al-Qalqashandi, Ibn Taghri Birdi, and Ibn Iyas, described in addition the decay of the larger network of canals, those maintained by the state (known as *sulṭani*). After the Black Death, mobilizing peasants to repair them became unfeasible and carrying out public works cumbersome and expensive. The deteriorating irrigation system rendered extensive lands uncultivable, leading in turn to a decline in agricultural yield. For most peasants, the cost of living went up: The rents they were paying landlords remained unchanged, but increased in real terms because of inflation and the devaluation of copper coins (*fulus*) as compared to gold ones (*dirham*). Declining agricultural production and rising rents caused exodus from the countryside to urban centers. This process of decreasing agrarian output and dwindling irrigation system would be reversed only after the mid-sixteenth century, as a result of intensive Ottoman intervention.[28]

In Europe, too, the number of peasants and of the general population markedly declined with the Black Death. Paradoxically, peasants experienced better material conditions, both because marginal lands were

---

[27] Dols, *Black Death*, 175–85.
[28] Borsch, *Black Death*, 40–54, 82–3, 86–8; Dols, *Black Death*, 158–69.

no longer cultivated for lack of workers, and because the shortage of peasants pushed up their wages. In addition, with fewer people now consuming food, general nutrition in cities and rural areas improved.[29] All over continental Europe and in England, "wages rose, unemployment dropped, per capita income rose, and investment in the production of finished … goods increased."[30] In the long term, urban depopulation, decreased demand for food, and government intervention to prevent prices from rising by stocking grain resulted in a drop in the price of most grains. Many farmers, faced with the need to pay higher wages to laborers and with declining income, moved to cities in the hope of finding better fortune. Overall, in the two centuries after the Black Death, European society became more urban.[31]

Apart from these analogous economic-agrarian developments, European and Middle Eastern societies followed very different paths in the centuries following the Black Death. Europe experienced far-reaching social and political changes from the second half of the fourteenth century onward that had no equivalent in the Middle East. The Black Death, along with the subsequent plagues that recurred in Europe until the early fifteenth century, are often seen as marking the end of the European Middle Ages. It was a watershed in European history, denoting the end of an era and the beginning of another.[32] No similar developments occurred in the Middle East until much later, and the obvious question is, Why? Why did two societies that seem to have sustained similar demographic, economic, and social effects of the plague, and that before the mid-fourteenth century had responded to plagues and other disasters similarly, take such strikingly divergent courses after the Black Death? The differences between Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East were unmistakable: In Europe, disaster prevention and containment, poor relief, city governance, and politics in general, as well as intellectual

---

[29] Jordan, *High Middle Ages*, 298–9.

[30] Borsch, *Black Death*, 65–6.

[31] David Nicholas, *The Transformation of Europe, 1300–1600* (London: Arnold, 1999), 94–6.

[32] Jordan, *High Middle Ages*, 297; John Hatcher, "England in the aftermath of the Black Death," *Past and Present* **144** (1994), 3–35; Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (London: UCL Press, 1996), 177–92; Ziegler, *Black Death*, 232–51; Klaus Bergdolt, *Die Pest: Geschichte des Schwarzen Todes* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2006), 50–7; Klaus Bergdolt, *Der Schwarze Tod in Europa: Die grosse Pest und das Ende des Mittelalters* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1994), 191–207. See also the many short articles that discuss how the Black Death changed Europe in William Bowsky, ed., *The Black Death: A Turning Point in History?* (Huntington, NY: R. E. Krieger, 1978).

discourse, all took a sharp turn in the decades following the Black Death, but not so in the Middle East. A combination of preexisting conditions in one society that did not exist in the other, along with certain cultural and religious attributes, accounted for the differences.[33] To understand these differences properly, I shall first offer a closer scrutiny of the Black Death's effects on European society.

THE BLACK DEATH IN EUROPE: A CLOSER LOOK

Much of the change that affected European society in the aftermath of the Black Death was borne by broader processes that had begun prior to it. The horrific plague cycles of the mid- to late-fourteenth century contributed to a social transformation on many levels, but they were not its only, or even principal, promoter. The weakening authority of the church was perhaps the most conspicuous of these changes. The adverse demographic impact of epidemics was especially acute in communities of monks, nuns, and collegiate chapters: Evidence suggests that mortality rates there were higher – sometimes by as much as 60 percent – than among the general population, possibly because of close interactions between their healthy and sick members. This necessitated a hasty recruitment of church functionaries to refill the depleted ranks. The wave of new recruits comprised people from the laity, many of whom joined the clergy for the accumulation of wealth rather than for spiritual reasons. Under the circumstances, younger priests advanced in rank faster than they would have in the past. In the process, the level of Latin scholarship and writing among the clergy deteriorated, as fewer Latin instructors remained to teach the new recruits. This, in turn, initiated a process of gradual shifting from Latin to vernacular usage in liturgy.[34] This set of changes could not but erode the overall public standing of the church.

The erosion of church prestige had its roots in earlier times. The late-thirteenth century struggle between the popes and the kings of France and England over the right of kings to tax the clergy escalated by the early fourteenth century to an open intervention of the French court in papal affairs and the election of popes. The temporary relocation of the papacy to Avignon, lasting from 1309 to 1376, marked the de facto

---

[33] And not, as has sometimes been argued, one society's exploitation of another. See David Landes, "Why Europe and the West? Why not China?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 20 (2006), 2:3–22.

[34] Jordan, *High Middle Ages*, 297–8.

subjugation of popes to the French Crown. Famines, wars, and plagues did not help the papacy regain its moral authority within European society, which in the fourteenth century was probably at an all-time low. This decline in church authority encouraged debates between scholars and the Dominicans, exemplified in the open confrontation between William of Ockham (d. 1347) and the papacy over the church's wealth accumulation.[35] More challengers of church authority followed. John Wycliffe's (d. 1384) open criticism of the church and the Avignon papacy gained much popularity, and opened the way for later dissenters, such as John Hus (d. 1415).[36]

One indication of the continued decline in church power was the emergence of civic organizations in European cities.[37] Most notable was the passing of alms collection and dissemination, and the dispensation of charitable services, from the clergy to secular agents. An elaborate charity system run by the church had sustained its authority over many of its followers, who were dependent on the congregation for assistance. The wresting of much of that authority from its hands through a series of laws and regulations regarding poverty, beggars, and the sick further weakened the church.[38]

That the handling of charity was taken over by private societies, laymen, and city councils signaled a shift in society's ideas about poverty. Previously, poverty was perceived as an unavoidable fact of life, sometime even a virtue, and charity as a means to alleviate misery, not to eradicate poverty. This view was cultivated by the church, whose monopoly on aiding the poor was a source of strength, with millions of Christians all over Europe heavily dependent on its institutions. The church therefore had no interest in resolving the problem of poverty for good. Civic

---

[35] Ibid., 314–22.
[36] For more on John Wycliffe, see Stephen Lahey, *John Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); for John Hus, see Craig Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 49–75.
[37] In some places, as in Venice, the city's takeover of charitable services was preceded by the formation of religious societies (*scoula*), formed among the laity as early as the thirteenth century. Such societies became less exclusive and had fewer ties to the church in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They offered charitable support to the public and often cooperated with the city in enforcing poor laws and running hospitals. See Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: The Social Institutions of a Catholic State, to 1620* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 33–83.
[38] Pullan, *Rich and Poor*; Sandra Cavallo, *Charity and Power in Early Modern Italy: Benefactors and Their Motives in Turin, 1541–1789* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); "Poor relief, humanism, and heresy," in Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975), 17–64.

authorities, however, had different priorities. They viewed poverty with disdain, an impediment to progress and to their envisioned modern, clean city. If charity would not resolve poverty, it could at least take it off the streets. Cities issued antibegging regulations and introduced criteria that distinguished between "deserving" poor, who qualified for assistance, and "undeserving," who were forced to work, fined, imprisoned, or expelled from the city. A related development was the change in the nature of hospitals, from houses caring unselectively for the poor and sick, managed by the church and run by a priest or bishop, to institutions run by civic officials under city regulations. By the mid-sixteenth century, many cities and states had poor laws that governed the administration and funding of hospitals and defined who would be entitled, or forced, to receive treatment in them. They also specified who would be prohibited from entering the city, and prescribed punishment for violators.[39]

Besides marking the weakening of the church, poor and sick regulations reflected changes in common notions regarding the state's role in the lives of its citizens, and the boundaries that authorities were allowed to cross. The shift was clearly seen in state efforts to control the spread of plague. Towns in Italy, such as Pistoia, forbade contact with places affected by the plague as early as 1348. In 1374, Bernabo Visconti, lord of Milan, placed guards to block the entry into the city of people from plague-stricken areas. In 1377, authorities in Ragusa (Dubrovnik) imposed mandatory thirty-day isolation on all ships arriving at the city, for fear of contagion. In the following century the rule was extended to forty days (hence the term "quarantine," from the Italian word for forty, *qaranta*) and to visitors arriving by land as well. By the outbreak of plague in 1400, and certainly by the mid-fifteenth century, most states in the Italian peninsula had instituted quarantine regulations, or other policies governing travel and entry in times of plague.[40] In the sixteenth century, quarantine of merchandise, people, and houses had already been a widespread mechanism of plague prevention all over Europe and, as a result, of firmer control of governments over the affairs of their people, and especially over travel and population movements.[41]

---

[39] Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 197–286; Cavallo, *Charity and Power*, 12–38; Davis, "Poor relief," 17–64.

[40] Susan Stuard, *A State of Deference: Ragusa/Dubrovnik in the Medieval Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 47–8; Ann Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 108–16; Giuseppe Dodero, *I Lazzaretti: Epidemie e quarantene in Sardegna* (Cagliari: Aipsa, 2001), 51.

[41] See, for example, Charles Creighton, *History of Epidemics in Britain* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), 312–20.

From the late-fourteenth century on, the evolution of charitable practices in Europe and the growing perception that poverty bred crime and disease led to improved hygiene in cities. Deeming plague to be caused by poisonous vapors, cities began to prohibit burial in church-yards and to establish extramural cemeteries instead; by the late-sixteenth century, burial outside city limits was the norm in many European towns. Plague was not the only reason for the shift to extramural bury-ing: As Craig Koslofsky explains, the early sixteenth century increase in population rendered burial in churchyards impossible and prompted city leaders to worry even more about diseases and public health.[42] Many poor laws were introduced during the first half of the sixteenth cen-tury, in part in response to swelling of pauper and beggar populations. Laws on cleanliness, the storage and disposal of waste, and the raising of farm animals within city walls were also promulgated.[43] City or state intervention in such matters had implications beyond the improvement of public hygiene. The prohibition of intramural burial interrupted cen-turies-old traditions of rites and customs associated with the world of the dead; just as quarantine did with the sick, it placed the dead outside the domain of the living. Likewise, rules that limited the breeding of ani-mals, required city residents to install cesspools, or demanded that they store garbage in receptacles and orderly dispose of it (rather than throw it out the window) interfered with time-honored notions of private and public. The state now penetrated areas that, in earlier centuries, it would not dare enter.[44]

The initially limited city and state infringement on the private domain gradually evolved into a power to regulate building, redesign cities, and eventually share – and even control – domestic culture. This was best seen in the reconstruction of London after the Great Fire of 1666 and of Lisbon following the 1755 earthquake (see Figure 1.1). After the fire in London, King Charles II ordered that land be surveyed and a new grid be set for the entire city. The architect Christopher Wren replaced a medieval city landscape of warrens and alleys with wide streets designed for better passage and enhanced commercial activity, and hence also for improved governmental observation and control of inhabitants' daily affairs. The

---

[42] Craig Koslofsky, *The Reformation of the Dead: Death and Ritual in Early Modern Germany, 1450–1700* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000), 40–6.

[43] For regulations in Paris, see Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 3–7. For cities in Germany, Hösel, *Unser Abfall*, 71–110.

[44] Yaron Ayalon, "Ottoman urban privacy in light of disaster recovery," *IJMES* **43** (2011), 3:513–28, and especially 522–3.
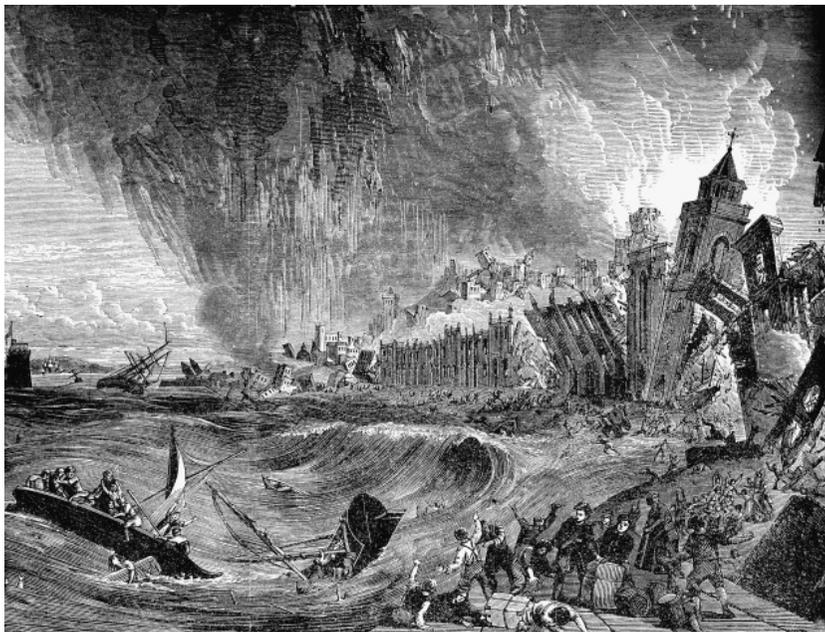
FIGURE 1.1. The Lisbon earthquake.
Source: Servet-i Funun, 1:15, 2 July 1891.

rebuilding of London introduced government and city regulations for private home construction and design.[45] In Lisbon, the immediate response of the royal court of José I included disposing of bodies, cleaning streets, ensuring food supplies, and suspending certain taxes.[46] A few weeks later, the secretary of state, the marquis de Pombal, launched a reconstruction project with the help of hired teams of engineers and architects. As in London – and in contrast to previous disasters – much thought was given to an urban design that would be more damage resistant and reflect a vision of a modern city.[47]

---

[45] Leo Hollis, *London Rising: The Men Who Made Modern London* (New York: Walker & Co., 2008), 135–56; one author considered the Great Fire to be a watershed for privacy, which was gradually redefined in subsequent decades (Christoph Heyl, *A Passion for Privacy: Untersuchungen zur Genese der bürgerlichen Privatsphäre in London, 1660–1800* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 213–304).

[46] Russell Dynes, "The Lisbon earthquake of 1755: The first modern disaster," in Theodore Braun and John Radner, eds., *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), 34–49.

[47] Jean Paul Poirier, *Le tremblement de terre de Lisbonne: 1755* (Paris: O. Jacob, 2005), 93–112. A similar pattern is seen in other major calamities of the time, such as the plague

The Black Death should also be seen, more broadly, in the context of the fourteenth century's environment and man-made disasters. Even without the Black Death, this was a difficult century to live in. Throughout most of it, from the first decade to at least the late 1370s, Europe suffered from especially cold and long winters coupled with distinctly cool and dry springs and summers. With a few exceptional years of moderate weather, the period of the Little Ice Age had a climate characterized by long droughts.[48] This had a devastating effect on harvests, and extensive areas were repeatedly hit by famine. Most horrendous was the Great Famine of 1315–22, caused by a mixture of adverse climate conditions that resulted in poor harvests and hence shortage in the markets; demographic pressures due to Europe's dramatic population increase in previous decades, which further exacerbated the economy; and wars in Scandinavia, Germany, Flanders, and the British Isles, which further disrupted food distribution.[49] From local skirmishes to the English-French encounters known as the Hundred Years' War, fighting continued to ravage Europe after the Great Famine and for much of the century. On one hand, the plague in its recurring cycles "resolved" problems of population pressure and improved subsistence by cutting demand more than production. On the other, the Black Death aggravated the tragic losses caused by famine, harsh weather, and war.

All of these destructive blows created a gloomy post–Black Death world, perhaps even gloomier than that of the Middle Ages. Uncertainty and fear of further impending disasters prevailed. Pessimism also marked the art of the period, in which grief, suffering, retribution, Christ's passion, torture in hell, and death were central themes.[50] As one historian has noted, the recurrence of the *danse macabre* in texts and in illustration in painting and sculpture, from the second half of the fourteenth century onward, was innately tied to plague outbreaks and the sense of imminent disaster.[51] European society's obsession with death was also seen in the increasing public prominence of funeral processions and their becoming occasions for projecting social status. In Florence, for instance, a culture of funeral flamboyance developed in the second half of the fourteenth

of Marseille of 1720 (Charles Carrière et al., *Marseille, ville morte: La peste de 1720* (Marseille: M. Garçon, 1968), 105–26).

[48] Ladurie, *Histoire*, 31–89.

[49] Jordan, *Great Famine*, 1–23.

[50] Ziegler, *Black Death*, 274–6.

[51] Jean Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur: La culpabilisation en Occident (XIIIe – XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), 108–17.

century. Wealth and status were nowhere better displayed than in funerals; some lavish processions included "stunning shows of candles, sumptuous bier cloths, caparisoned horses, and other displays of material wealth."[52] The pessimism spawned by the blows of nature was exacerbated by the crisis in the church and its public role. We have already noted the decline in the church's spiritual authority, following the depletion of its ranks and the appointment of lay and often unfit people to replace the old clergy. More generally, there was a pervasive sense of disappointment with the church, which had not found a solution to the plague. The second half of the fourteenth century saw a dramatic rise in donations to the church and of church building all over Europe, but it was also a period of many misgivings regarding the social and religious order that had existed until then. The church "continued as an immensely potent force … but the unquestioned authority which it had been used to exercise over its members was never to be recovered."[53]

Fear and doubt bred gloom. But they also advanced new ideas and forms of scholarship, known as civic humanism. Renaissance humanism had its origins before the Black Death: Petrarch (d. 1374) wrote his epic *Africa*, which garnered him much fame, before 1340; and his friend Boccaccio gained reputation with the writing of *The Filocolo* at least a decade before his famous *Decameron*. Plagues, however, changed the ways authors of the time were writing. This happened not only because authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio lived through the plague, lost friends and family, and experienced suffering firsthand,[54] but also because people's outlook on life, their place in this world, and their point of reference were profoundly shaken. From these uncertainties new forms of piety emerged, which prompted people to sponsor artists and scholars, and which in turn encouraged the rise of prolific secular historians, translators, copiers of ancient texts, book collectors, and artists. It was a movement typified by fascination, sometimes obsession, with every aspect of the ancient world. And it produced many works in the vernacular, making knowledge accessible to more people. According to Hans Baron, important advances in the Renaissance took place only after the emergence of civic authorities that allowed authors and artists the freedom to create, and when the solitary medieval scholar was replaced by the politically

---

[52] Sharon Strocchia, *Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 55–104, quote from 55.

[53] Ziegler, *Black Death*, 259–70, quote from 270.

[54] For example, see Renee Watkins, "Petrarch and the Black Death: From fear to monuments," *Studies in the Renaissance* 19 (1972), 196–223.

active one.[55] The works of Renaissance humanists spread across Europe, especially following the advent of printing. The invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century facilitated the widespread diffusion of ideas and was thereby responsible, to a large extent, for the success of the Protestant Reformation, for the scientific revolution, and for the rise of explanations for natural disasters not involving God.[56]

Taking place after the changes alluded to previously, the Great Fire of London and the Lisbon earthquake were "modern" disasters. They were modern not merely because they allowed authorities to enhance their control over public and private spaces, but also because they prompted a public debate about disasters, which in turn stimulated a philosophical discussion of religion, science, and society that prepared the ground for modern political and economic thought. In the aftermath of the London plague of 1665–6, new theories appeared on how to confront future disasters in more economical and humane ways.[57] The Great Fire was the initiating moment for John Locke and other philosophers and political theorists. In postfire London, issues of religion and political authority were discussed in cafés and in printed books and pamphlets.[58] The London fire primarily preoccupied the English, but the Lisbon earthquake was, probably for the first time, discussed across Europe and beyond.[59] Coming about during the optimistic age of the Enlightenment, it inspired scholars across countries to consider its occurrence and relevance to society. Voltaire's famous *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* was one such piece on the catastrophe, which was also addressed by novelists, playwrights,

---

[55] Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 3–7.

[56] The classic thesis that sees printing as the precursor of the major developments in European history is Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), in 2 volumes. For an approach attributing a more modest role to it, see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Assessing the historic role of printing is a matter of ongoing controversy among scholars; see Anthony Grafton, "How revolutionary was the print revolution?" Elizabeth Eisenstein, "An unacknowledged revolution revisited," Adrian Johns, "How to acknowledge a revolution," and Elizabeth Eisensten, "Reply," *AHR* 107 (2002), 1:84–128.

[57] Lloyd Moote and Dorothy Moote, *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 253–4.

[58] Leo Hollis, *The Phoenix: St. Paul's Cathedral and the Men Who Made Modern London* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), 229–30.

[59] The earthquake was even reported to the Ottoman sultan Osman III (r. 1754–7) on 17 January 1756 – the only pre–nineteenth century European natural disaster I found evidence for in the Ottoman archives (BOA, C. HR., 3215).

and poets all over Europe. They debated the roles of God and science in such horrendous events and, more broadly, the real meaning of good and evil.[60] Such literary developments could hardly have taken place without the earlier transformations that followed the Black Death.

WHY WAS THE MIDDLE EAST DIFFERENT?

The Black Death and subsequent natural disasters, the crisis in the church, wars – all of these generated vast changes that would transform European society, politics, and religion in later centuries. In the Middle East such changes were much slower to evolve. As in Europe, the Black Death in the eastern Mediterranean was only one in a series of natural disasters that hit the region in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Egypt and Syria, for example, experienced famine in the years 1264, 1295–6, 1336, 1373–5, 1394–6, 1402–4, and 1415–16.[61] As in Europe, plague and other epidemics continued to strike after the Black Death, erupting in 1362–4, 1373–5, 1395, and 1405 and probably in other years as well.[62] Their main causes were the same in both Europe and the Middle East: filthy and overcrowded cities, irregular food supply, and failed harvests due to drought, or, in Egypt, a low Nile flood. Some of these natural adversities may have been triggered by the extremely cold Little Ice Age climate of the fourteenth century, which affected Europe and the Middle East.[63] Yet the cumulative effect of these disasters seems to have been different for Christian and Muslim societies. The latter experienced no religious upheaval as dramatic as its European counterpart; intellectual, artistic, and architectural changes were slower to develop there; and ideas about poverty, charity, and health had not changed as profoundly as they had in Europe, until the nineteenth century.

   Probably the most important reason behind these differences was the absence, in Islam, of an institution equivalent to the church. For Christians

---

[60] For a discussion of Voltaire's poem, its meaning, and responses to it in his home country of Switzerland, see Monika Gisler, "Optimism and theodicy: Perceptions of the Lisbon earthquake in protestant Switzerland," in Braun and Radner, eds., *Lisbon Earthquake*, 247–64. For a discussion of poetic, literary, and theatrical works inspired by the Lisbon earthquake, see Poirier, *Tremblement*, 135–80.

[61] Sabra, *Poverty and Charity*, 138–57.

[62] Ibid., Dols, *Black Death*, 326–8.

[63] White has found correlation between Little Ice Age weather in Europe and that occurring in the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There is no reason to assume the same global phenomenon, which took place throughout much of the fourteenth century, did not affect the Middle East as well (White, *Climate*, 126–39).

of medieval Europe, the church was an essential element of their existence. It was all but synonymous with society as a whole: One became a member of it from birth, and baptism bound a person in obligations that could not be undone. The church had no coercion mechanism similar to those available to emperors, kings, or even the community. But it owned vast lands and other property; had its own laws, courts, tax collectors, administrative apparatus; and was run by a political system headed by popes, who believed that all other governing powers were their subordinates. Everything of import in one's life, from birth through family celebrations to death, occurred in the church or was governed by it. Given the church's control over people's significant lifetime events and over the collection and dispensation of charity, people's relationship with it was one of near-absolute dependency.[64] In the Muslim world, the role of religion in a person's life was quite different. Here, there was no one supreme source of spiritual guidance, nor a rigid hierarchical structure of transmitting the faith to the individual believer. Instead, there existed a diffuse network of scholars, judges, mosques, schools, and lodges. To be sure, religious belief was central in the lives of the vast majority of Muslims, but a structure of binding association and control like that which existed in Christianity was unknown in the Muslim world.

These essential differences in the role of religion meant different expectations from the institutions representing it: the tighter the control and dependence, the higher the expectations. When expectations were frustrated, because the religious leadership failed to prevent or alleviate suffering, the public standing of religious organizations declined. In Europe, as we have seen, recurring natural crises contributed to a weakening of the church and to the gradual assumption of its tasks by new civic authorities. Old practices of charity, and the belief in the inevitability of poverty, disease, natural disasters, and premature death – all marks of church power – had to go. The church had failed to defend Europe from the Black Death. Now civic authorities were prepared to seek other solutions.

In the fourteenth-century Muslim world, by contrast, there was no comparable challenge to religious authority, because religion was more remote from political power. Islam emerged as a polity whose leaders, the Prophet and his early successors, the Rashidun (632–61) and Umayyad caliphs (661–750), embodied at once religious and political authority.

---

[64] R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 16–21.

Under the Abbasids, the caliphs were still seen as both religious and political leaders, but their political power declined after the mid-ninth century and was all but gone after the Buyid (or Buwaihid) takeover of Baghdad in 945. Since that point and until the Mongol sacking of the city in 1258, the caliphs served mostly as symbols of spiritual authority in the Muslim community, while political-military power rested with others, the Buyids and the Seljuqs who replaced them. By the time the Mamluks gained power in Cairo in the mid-thirteenth century, the split between political and religious authority was complete. The Mamluks kept an Abbasid caliph in their court and maintained the *shar'i* judicial system to enhance their legitimacy, but this was a symbolic token more than anything else.[65]

The Mamluks, who ruled Egypt and Syria during the Black Death, were not religious rulers, but they did operate within a general framework of Islamic norms. This included the practice of charity. As in Christianity, charity in Islam had been inseparably tied to religious rites and duties. Giving to charity was a religious duty, and paying an alms tax (*zakat*) was one of the five pillars of the faith binding on all Muslims. But unlike in the Christian world, there was no central agency in Islam to administer charitable collection and distribution. The organized levying of *zakat*, once a state responsibility, was abandoned at some point before the rise of the Ottomans and became a personal duty of each Muslim, not a state obligation. The definition of poverty, and the role of a ruler and of society in alleviating it, derived from two sources: the prophetic tradition, which treated poverty as a given and the poor as an integral part of society to be treated with compassion; and the concept of moral economy, which guided the Mamluk and later Islamic states and which regarded feeding the subjects and making foodstuff affordable as essential to government survival.[66] Rulers were expected to help their subjects in times of crisis, but not to resolve poverty altogether. The poor had to exist, in part because helping them was a binding duty. Aiding the indigent was a central feature of Muslim social routine: from alms collecting in

[65] Michael Bonner, "The waning of empire, 861–945" and Hugh Kennedy, "The late 'Abbāsid pattern, 945–1050," in Michael Cook, ed., *The New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1:305–93; Linda Northrup, "The Baḥrī Mamluk Sultanate, 1250–1390," in Carl Petry, ed., *The Cambridge History of Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1:255–6.

[66] For Islamic traditions on poverty and charity, see Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 30–66. For moral economy, see Boaz Shoshan, *Popular Culture in Medieval Cairo* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65–6.

mosques, through property endowing as *waqf* for the needy and donating to existing foundations, to unrecorded private giving by individuals. The Qur'an broadly defined the criteria for entitlement to charity, and these were applied in poor relief throughout the Muslim world. The poor, then, fulfilled an important role in Muslim society rather than posing a problem to it. And rulers had an interest in maintaining that system and contributing to charity, which portrayed them as just and pious.[67]

There were other differences between European and Muslim societies at this juncture. One was related to political continuity. As I have already explained, wars and conquests devastated Europe in the fourteenth century. The scene was quite different in Egypt and Syria, where Mamluk rule was marked by relative stability, which made new social and political movements less likely to emerge there. Despite power struggles among Mamluk elite groups, some minor rebellions against them, and one dynastic transition in 1382, when the Burji household under Barquq replaced the Baḥri Mamluks, there were no meaningful challenges to Mamluk rule from their defeating of the Ilkhanids in Marj al-Suffar (outside Damascus) in 1303 until the early sixteenth century.[68] Only in Anatolia was the situation somewhat similar to that of western and central Europe. Political and military strife there from the eleventh century led to a redrawing of the political map by the thirteenth century, and to the emergence of the Ottomans there in the early fourteenth.

Another difference was that in Europe, emerging civic authorities reflected the new political and social spirit of the Renaissance. One important expression of this was that after the mid-fourteenth century, more and more texts were written in the vernacular instead of Latin. Latin had been the language of liturgy and scholarship in the Middle Ages, and the church had a near-monopoly on its instruction, which took place primarily in churches and monasteries. Since writings were produced mostly in that language, the church largely controlled the dissemination and quality of knowledge. As scholars began to shift to the vernacular, and as liturgical texts were being translated from Latin after the sharp drop in Latin scholars after the Black Death, people began to connect to their faith in new ways. Many became exposed to secular texts, directly or by listening to others read them. In the Middle East, too, scholars must have perished in great numbers during the Black Death. But this did not result

---

[67] Singer, *Charity*, 114–45 and especially 143.
[68] Amalia Levanoni, "The Mamlūks in Egypt and Syria: The Turkish Mamlūk sultanate (648–784/1250–1832) and the Circassian Mamlūk sultanate (784–923/1382–1517)" in *New Cambridge History of Islam*, 2:237–79.

in a linguistic and textual predicament as it did in Europe. Unlike Latin, Arabic was the language of ritual as well as of scholarly and mundane affairs. True, street Arabic was different from that of the Qur'an, *ḥadith*, or that in which scholars like Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Suyuṭi phrased their ideas in writing. But the gulf between them was not so significant, and surely smaller than that between Latin and the European vernaculars.[69] The Islamic scholarly tradition was revered by its believers, but few were exposed to it firsthand. This did not change after the Black Death, because nothing had occurred that would upset the equilibrium between the spoken and the written idioms. Equally important, printing, the powerful dynamo of cultural change in Europe, was not adopted in the Muslim world until centuries later. Why this was so is a question more intricate than it seems at first glance; it is beyond the scope of our discussion here.[70]

The shift in Europe from the parish and diocese to urban civic authorities as key organizational units facilitated the emergence of modern practices of poor relief and disaster control. By contrast, Mamluk and Ottoman cities, although featuring most of the attributes of urban centers as defined by Max Weber – fortifications, markets, a network of streets and alleys[71] – did not develop administrative independence. Some cities did serve as the seat of provincial governors, and others had strong local leadership of urban notables. But political authority lay with the central government, which treated the cities as convenient units for land division, trade, raising taxes, and military conscription, run by state agents. Formal municipal authorities were established only after the mid-nineteenth century. Until then, Middle Eastern cities did not evolve into autonomous units akin to those that had emerged in Europe. An Islamic city's local leadership was thus in no position to introduce practices that would challenge established conventions.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the definitions of poverty and of entitlement to charitable aid did not change much in the Middle East during the century after the Black Death. The authorities did not apply any novel measures in combating poverty, eliminating beggary, or isolating the sick.

---

[69] Benjamin Hary, *Multiglossia in Judeo-Arabic* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 35–47.
[70] For more on this problematic issue, see Lutz Berger, "Zur Problematik der späten Einführung des Buchdrucks in der islamischen Welt," in Ulrich Marzolph, ed., *Das gedruckte Buch im Vorderen Orient* (Dortmund: Verlag für Orientkunde, 2002), 15–28; Dana Sajdi, "Print and its discontents: A case for pre-print journalism and other sundry print matters," *Translator* **15** (2009), 1:105–38.
[71] Max Weber, *The City* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 81–2.

Throughout Islamic history, beggars, wayfarers, and the sick had always had places to turn to for sleep, a warm meal, or medical treatment. Aid was extensively delivered in mosques and many cities also had hospitals. The Umayyad caliph al-Walid (r. 705–15) built what seems to have been the first hospital in Muslim history, in Damascus.[72] His hospital, and many others that sprang up subsequently, were founded as charitable institutions, usually in proximity to a mosque. They took care of the physically and mentally ill, as well as passersby who had no place to stay; patients were offered at least three days of hospitality. The functions of the Islamic hospital apparently had not changed much by 1427, when a man who was on his way to the *ḥajj* in Mecca was so impressed by the Nur al-Din hospital in Damascus that he pretended to be sick and was hospitalized there for three days, during which he was served the most exquisite foods.[73] Staying at a hospital was voluntary. There might have been cases when mentally ill patients or criminals were forcefully placed there,[74] but the Mamluks implemented no policies such as those enacted in fifteenth-century Europe, where civic authorities and private societies transformed medieval hospitals into institutions for the involuntary confinement of the poor who refused to work or leave town, the sick, and prostitutes.[75]

The role and norms of hospitals were slow to change in the Muslim world, as was the common perception regarding the scant relationship between poverty, hygiene, and disease. Muslim scholars in the aftermath of the Black Death still adhered to the old distrust regarding contagion and did not question the premise that plague and other disasters were caused by God. Nor was there a systematic effort on the part of the government to deal with disasters, partly because of internal political

---

[72] Aḥmad ʿIsa, *Taʾrikh al-bimaristanat fi al-Islam* (Damascus: Jamʿiyat al-Tamaddun al-Islami, 1939), 203.

[73] Ibid., 210–11.

[74] A later example that still may be characteristic of the role hospitals played in Muslim society is that of ʿUmar Efendi, a wealthy Damascene and expert in Arabic and Turkish calligraphy who began selling counterfeit *firman*s bearing a "sultanic" *buyuruldu* (the sultan's signature on documents, literally meaning "it was thus ordered"). The pasha ordered his arm cut off, after which he was put bleeding on a donkey and taken to the hospital. He stayed there for three days until he died. (Muḥammad ibn Kannan, *Yawmiyat shamiyya* (Damascus: Dar al-Ṭabbaʿ, 1994), 195).

[75] For example, see Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 202–7. As medical facilities, however, hospitals grew and expanded in the Ottoman period and became bureaucratized institutions employing physicians and other staff who were on the government's payroll; Miri Shefer Mossensohn, *Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500–1700* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

rivalries that haunted the Mamluks from the late-fourteenth century. This was clearly the case during the 1374–6 famine and epidemic and in later crises in the fifteenth century; in the famine and plague of 1402–4, the state made perfunctory attempts to feed the poor.[76] Another possible explanation for Mamluk inaction is more significant. With their power on the decline from the late-fourteenth century on, Mamluk sultans may have been cautious about meddling with a centuries-old order, in which the state was not expected to interfere in certain matters. Charity was mostly conducted privately, and the government would be overstepping its boundaries if it attempted to regulate it, by taking beggars off the streets or confining the poor and sick in asylums. It is equally possible that, for the same reason, no visible changes occurred in hygienic routines such as street cleaning, garbage collection, and burial practices. The prevailing denial of contagion precluded a connection between courtyard and mosque burials and disease. Even the growth of cities in Egypt and Syria did not lead to the relocation of cemeteries. Prohibiting burial in residential areas would have removed the world of the dead, with its associated rites and customs, from that of the living and would have changed society's daily functioning. The same can be said about quarantine policies, which were introduced in the Middle East by the Ottomans only in the eighteenth century and fully implemented in the nineteenth, just as they were being phased out in Europe. When quarantine was introduced in the Middle East, it met with many enemies, some opposed to it on religious grounds, others because it created artificial barriers in society.[77]

That one society should embrace measures that another had rejected may suggest that, beyond the causes already considered, cultural factors were also at play here. For example, it is plausible that Christian and Muslim societies in general had different perceptions of threat: A disaster that could shatter the social structure of one might be seen by the other as just another natural occurrence. Alan Mikhail has persuasively shown that in the eighteenth-century Middle East, plague was regarded as an integral quality of the environment, an event people expected and were trained to deal with.[78] This was apparently no different in the fourteenth century. In Europe, wars, the decline of church power, and the rise of the city led to a new understanding of death. Not so in the Middle East,

---

[76] Sabra, *Poverty and Charity*, 146–8, 150–5. Contemporary sources mention no other measures taken by it.

[77] Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 232–3.

[78] Ibid., 214–15.

where customs and rites related to disease, dying, and death all remained basically unaltered. Another possible cultural factor, more easily cited than explained, could be differences in mindset between European and Middle Eastern societies. Many times throughout its history, Muslim society was more suspicious of new technologies and innovations than its European-Christian counterpart. Precedent had immense power; when past practices and innovation clashed, the former was usually more likely to win.[79] Reverence for precedent was probably also a major reason why Muslim societies rejected printing for such a long time, as it would have altered old practices of copying texts and rendered some highly revered professions, such as scribes, obsolete.[80] Time-honored norms prevailed over novel technology. And, unlike in Europe after the Black Death, no major crisis occurred in the Middle East that would prompt people to reconsider those norms.

Muslim adherence to precedent, which historians often evoke to explain why changes did not occur, was more than just a theoretical principle. It characterized Islamic scholarship and was a central brick in the edifice of early as well as later Islamic commentaries. It informed the reasoning of plague treatises, rulings of Ottoman jurists on social issues, and Muslim court (*maḥkama*) decisions all over the empire. The weight of precedent grew under the Ottomans compared with earlier Islamic states, apparently underlying their careful keeping of records.[81] With such preference for old over new, change had to be slower to emerge in the Ottoman Empire than in Europe. During the centuries from the Black Death to the nineteenth century, realities in the empire did alter in more ways than one, and new ideas were introduced, but on the whole these were subtler and more limited changes than those affecting Europe. Religious practices changed little; the basic tenets of politics remained

---

[79] See the discussion in ibid., 52–8. Mikhail has determined that "precedent was law in Ottoman Egypt" (53).

[80] Printing would have threatened established practices of copying texts by hand and affected the standing of scribes and the written word. It would also have increased literacy and reduced the status and prestige of the tiny group of intellectuals who read, wrote, and participated in scholarly discourse. And it would have transformed how people read, from in-depth study of few texts to cursory reading of many. Yaron Ayalon, "Richelieu in Arabic: The Catholic printed message to the Orient in the seventeenth century," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* **19** (2008), 2:159–61.

[81] For an example of precedent in plague treatises, see Marʿi bin Yusuf al-Ḥanbali, "Taḥqiq al-ẓunun bi-ikhbar al-ṭaʿun," Ms. Esad Efendi 3567-1 in SL, 22–47; for precedent in the ruling of jurists, see Colin Imber, *Ebu's-Suʿud: The Islamic Legal Tradition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 34–8; for court cases, see Marcus, *Eve of Modernity*, 104–5.

the same; and new forms and genres of writing did not emerge. Needless to say, cultural explanations such as these are ever problematic and even carry the risk of a condescending reading of the other society. One should therefore be especially cautious not to ascribe to them undue interpretive weight. Yet, it might be unwise to discard them altogether as useless.

In the fourteenth century, the conditions were ripe for a deep social transformation in Europe, and the Black Death served as a catalyst. Similar conditions did not exist in the Middle East at the time of the Black Death, nor in the following decades. In the two centuries after the Black Death, Europe leapt into a new age that gave it a significant technological advantage over the rest of the world, including the Middle East and China. It would make Europeans pioneers of geographical exploration, leaders in international trade, and exploiters of other countries through colonization. The Black Death thus created a new world in Western Europe, which had no parallels elsewhere. But in one area of the Middle East, in western Anatolia, the Black Death made worse the effects of other political and natural disasters on a crumbling Greek civilization. It was during the years of the Black Death that the fate of the area was decided in favor of a rising power, the Ottomans, who in the following two centuries would come to dominate the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and North Africa. Thus the rise of the Ottomans was one major effect the Black Death had on the history of the region.

THE BLACK DEATH AND THE RISE OF THE OTTOMANS

If the Black Death in the Middle East initiated no religious, social, political, or scholarly makeover of the kind it did in Europe, its historic effect was no less dramatic. Along with a set of subsequent epidemics, the Black Death played a key role in the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans emerged from one of the principalities (*beylik*s) in western Anatolia in the late-thirteenth century. Within a century and a half, they crushed the Byzantine Empire, absorbed most of the neighboring principalities in Anatolia, conquered vast lands in southeastern Europe, and came to rule over two continents from a center they established in the former capital of Eastern Christianity, Constantinople. The Ottomans had seized large territories from the Byzantines already before the mid-fourteenth century, including Bursa, their first capital (1326); Nicaea (İznik, 1331); and Nicomedia (İzmit, 1337). But most conquests of strategic importance to them took place after the Black Death. These included Gallipoli

(Gelibolu) in 1354; Edirne, which became their second capital, in 1365; Thrace and Macedonia in the 1370s and 1380s; extensive parts of the Balkans, including Sofia in 1382, Albania in 1385, and most of Serbia by 1389; and Salonica in 1387, which the Ottomans would lose and then regain in 1430.[82]

The Black Death was destructive for the Byzantine state. It arrived in Anatolia in late 1346 and reached Constantinople in 1347. As in Europe, the Black Death eliminated a significant proportion of the population in the capital and other towns and aggravated the already poor economic and agrarian conditions in cities and the countryside.[83] The Black Death devastated Byzantium especially because it occurred after two civil wars over succession, in the 1320s and 1340s, which left the state stripped of cash and vulnerable to Venetian, Genoese, and Ottoman intervention and invasions.[84] From 1346 to 1352, the epidemic ravaged Byzantine cities, depleting their populations and leaving few soldiers to defend them. In 1352, facing threats from Serbia and Bulgaria and a civil war, Emperor John Cantacuzenus concluded a pact with Süleyman, the son of Sultan Orhan; invited the Ottomans to cross the Dardanelles; and gave them a presence in Rumelia. Two years later, the Ottomans would take advantage of this opportunity, when an earthquake that shattered many Byzantine strongholds allowed them to capture the damaged fortress of Gallipoli and advance farther into Byzantine territory. From then on, the Ottomans became major rivals of the Byzantines, whose cities continued to be hit by more natural disasters. By 1453, when Mehmet II conquered Constantinople, the city had barely thirty thousand people and only a few thousand soldiers to defend it.[85]

---

[82] For more on early Ottoman conquests, see Rudi Paul Lindner, "Anatolia, 1300–1451," and Machiel Kiel, "The incorporation of the Balkans into the Ottoman Empire," in Kate Fleet, ed., *The Cambridge History of Turkey*. Vol. 1. *Byzantium to Turkey, 1071–1453* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 102–91.

[83] Gottfried, *Black Death*, 37–8.

[84] Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 772–3; Angeliki Laiou, ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: From the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2002), 26.

[85] Uli Schamiloglu, "The rise of the Ottoman Empire: The Black Death in medieval Anatolia and its impact on Turkish civilization," in Neguin Yavari et al., eds., *Views from the Edge: Essays in Honor of Richard W. Bulliet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 270–2. For details on the 1354 Gallipoli earthquake, see Ambraseys, *Earthquakes in the Mediterranean*, 372–5. Earthquakes hit Byzantine territories also in 1362, 1366, 1374, 1383, 1389, 1402, 1407, 1415, 1418, and 1419 (ibid., 376–88).

The Black Death obviously affected the Ottomans, too, but to a much lesser extent. Unlike Byzantium, the Ottoman state comprised nomadic groups – plundering rather than pastoral – that were constantly on the move.[86] Because plague is carried by rodents, it affects cities and sedentary populations the most, as it requires denser population and human-rat interactions on a large enough scale for an epidemic to break out and run its course. Being constantly on the move, the Ottoman forces were less susceptible to plague and suffered fewer casualties than the Byzantines. Furthermore, plague usually spread from the coasts inland, arriving at a new location via ships carrying rodents. Coastal-maritime states were therefore affected to a greater degree by it, and the Black Death was no exception: The plague ravaged the Turkic principalities along the Aegean and Mediterranean, such as Karaman, Menteşe, Aydın, Saruhan, and Karesi. Although some emirates, such as Karaman and Aydın, lasted into the fifteenth century, the devastating effects of the Black Death no doubt contributed to the eventual incorporation of the Turkish principalities into the Ottoman state.[87]

It goes without saying that the Black Death was not the sole reason for Ottoman success. But it seems that most accounts on the rise of the Ottoman Empire give the epidemic much less than its due attention.[88] Historians usually point to the central role religious factors played in Ottoman-Byzantine struggles and the Ottoman triumph. Since the 1920s, historians have been debating the nature of the religion the Ottomans introduced and its effect on their success.[89] The issue has been amply discussed in the literature; hence I need only review the main arguments here. The theory most Western historians of the Ottomans had accepted until recently was a modified version of the ideas of Paul Wittek from 1937. In what came to be known as the "Gazi thesis," Wittek argued that the

[86] Reşat Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 15–18.

[87] Schamiloglu, "Rise of the Ottoman Empire," 271; Feridun Emecen, "Anatolian Emirates," in Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Facts On File, 2009), 40–2.

[88] Carter Findley, *The Turks in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 73. The Black Death is mentioned only in passing in the *Cambridge History of Turkey* (Kiel, "Ottoman expansion," 145). Other accounts of early Ottoman history that do not mention the Black Death are (pages refer to relevant time frame where the Black Death should have appeared): Halil İnalcık, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*. Vol. 1. *1300–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15–6; Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 14–21; and Ágoston and Masters, eds., *Encyclopedia*, 110.

[89] For a more detailed overview of this scholarly question, see Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 5–13.

early Ottomans were bands of genealogically unrelated Muslim warriors (*gazi*s), influenced by the Seljuq tradition of raiding into non-Muslim territory and bound by a common desire to fight Christian infidels.[90] The 1994 authoritative *Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* still offered the Gazi thesis, albeit in a modified form, as the main explanation for Ottoman expansion in the fourteenth century. Halil İnalcık, the book's editor and author of the section on early Ottoman history, also suggested that the *gazi* frontier character of the early Ottomans shaped the history of their empire in the centuries to come.[91] Cemal Kafadar has also accepted the thesis in essence, noting that the *gazi* ethos was one of several elements that made up Ottoman identity, which emerged from the inclusive nature of Christianity and Islam in western Anatolia.[92] Today, historians still use the Gazi thesis, with some modifications that allow non-Muslims to be represented in the Ottoman narrative, to explain the rise of the Ottomans.[93]

Several historians have ventured to challenge the Gazi thesis. Colin Imber has argued that the sources historians used to construct early Ottoman history, having been written no earlier than the fifteenth century "are without value." As "all the 'facts' about Osman Gazi and his followers are actually fiction," one should discard the assumptions that the Ottomans were nomads, *gazi*s, peasants, or any combination of these. Instead, Imber has raised the possibility that the early Ottomans raided neighboring territories for the purpose of plundering and obtaining slaves, and that *gazi* (or *ghazi* in Arabic) was synonymous with *akıncı*, "raider" in Turkish.[94] Heath Lowry has taken Imber's argument further and suggested that the purpose of Ottoman expansion was pillaging rather than converting the enemy to Islam. That Islam was not the banner uniting all early Ottomans is clear from the great number of non-Muslims who joined the Ottoman forces, including commanders who led Ottoman armies into conquests in Thrace and the Balkans. Early Ottoman society, Lowry has suggested, was one in which Christians and Muslims coexisted, a frontier community where any person interested

---

[90] Paul Wittek, *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1938), 14, 20–1, 50–1.
[91] İnalcık, *Economic and Social,* vol. 1, 11.
[92] Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
[93] See, for example, Giancarlo Casale, *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 29.
[94] Colin Imber, "The legend of Osman Gazi," in Colin Imber, ed., *Studies in Ottoman History and Law* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1996), 323–31, quotations from 329.

FIGURE 1.2. The Gazi Evrenos *'imaret* in Komotini, built c. 1360–80. *'Imaret*s such as this served as a venue for Christian-Muslim encounters in the Ottoman Empire from the fourteenth century on.
Adapted from a photo by Georgios Giannopoulos, 2011. Reproduced under CC BY-SA 3.0 license, http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/legalcode.

in the growth of the state had a place.[95] The early Ottoman state was a pluralistic society, one that integrated Muslim and non-Muslim values and allowed the expression of many identities. This is reflected in the numerous public structures from that period that served people of all religions, including dervish lodges (*tekke*s or *zaviye*s), public baths, and shrines (see Figure 1.2). [96]

Given available historical and archaeological evidence, Lowry and Imber's theses offer a better explanation for the rise of the empire; however, they, like other scholars, pay little attention to the role of plague in early Ottoman successes. One scholar has emphasized the connection between the Black Death and the rise of the Ottomans. On the basis of his study of the Mongol-Turkic Golden Horde and the effects of the Black Death on it, Uli Schamiloğlu has proposed some possible consequences of the plague for Anatolia. These included two linguistic

[95] Lowry, *Nature*, 66–7, 93.
[96] Heath Lowry, *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans, 1350–1550: The Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece* (Istanbul: Bahçeşehir University, 2008), 16–64, and especially 35–9.

changes occurring in the second half of the fourteenth century: one as Turkish replaced Arabic and Persian as the languages of scholarship and the other as Turkish itself became orthographically closer to Persian rather than to Central Asian Turkic dialects used only by a limited group of scholars. Schamiloğlu equates this process with the shift from Latin to the vernacular in European scholarship.[97] Such changes, combined with the devastation the Black Death had wrought among the sedentary Byzantines, provided for the rise of a new political-cultural entity, one that had its roots in several traditions: Islamic, Central Asian Turkic, and Byzantine. The Black Death as a factor shaping the region's history does not, therefore, invalidate the ideas of Lowry and Imber; rather, it supports and complements them. It is only through this pluralistic understanding of the early Ottoman state that we are able to explain subsequent developments – political, social, and in response to disasters – in later periods.

PLURALISM AND SOCIAL WELFARE: THE APOGEE OF OTTOMAN POWER

Religious and cultural pluralism benefited the state in its early stages. It left little room for internal dissent and helped create an empire that attracted followers from Byzantium and other Anatolian *beylik*s. During the first half of the fourteenth century, when Osman and his son Orhan conquered Byzantine towns, members of the Byzantine army defected to the Ottoman side. With time, many converted to Islam, but this apparently indicated their desire to assume the identity of the group more than an Ottoman bidding to spread Islam. This was best illustrated after the 1326 conquest of Bursa. The Byzantine minister Saroz negotiated surrender terms with Köse Mihal, a Greek convert to Islam, who commanded the Ottoman forces that captured the city. When negotiations ended, Saroz decided to become an Ottoman instead of returning to Constantinople. He explained his act to Orhan, "Your state is growing bigger and bigger every day. Ours has turned." Saroz, then, switched sides because he wished to join the winning party. One may imagine that such was also the reason for many other former Byzantine subjects who moved to side with the Ottomans. Unlike in Byzantium, where life routine was marred by wars and economic instability, the Ottomans provided stability, prospects for increasing one's wealth, and a reasonable

---

[97] Schamiloglu, "Rise of the Ottoman Empire," 268–9.

tax burden.⁹⁸ This process, of Ottoman conquerors collecting followers along the way, was accelerated by the horrors of the Black Death.

During the first two centuries, the Ottomans were expanding primarily in Europe. Wherever they established their rule they instituted relative religious tolerance and integration of traditions. They may not have seen themselves as standard bearers of Islam at first, but the populations they conquered – previously under Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian, or Hungarian rule – probably saw them as such, as did their enemies in Europe.⁹⁹ Conversions to Islam along with forced migrations took place in the Balkans, as the Ottomans sought to repopulate their capital. They also treated the newly conquered areas as a reservoir of future soldiers, recruited young Christian boys through the *devşirme* system, and shipped them to Istanbul, where they were raised as Muslims and trained. Nonetheless, the character of the Ottoman state did not change as it grew and incorporated more areas, at least not before the sixteenth century. Mehmet II, who conquered Constantinople in 1453 and put an end to the Byzantine Empire, was fascinated by Greek and Christian culture. He studied foreign languages, including Greek and Latin; had books in those languages in his personal library; and, according to some testimonies, worshiped Christian relics.¹⁰⁰ Mehmet's conversion of the Aya Sofia to a mosque was not merely an expression of Islamic devotion, but also of Ottoman imperial power. It suggests that in his time, practicing one religion did not preclude following the principles of another.

More important for our discussion was Sultan Selim I's conquest of the Arab lands in 1516–17 and the Ottomanization of Arab society. After Ottoman victories over the Mamluks in Marj Dabiq (near Aleppo), in August 1516, and in Ridaniyya (north of Cairo), in January 1517, Mamluk rule over Egypt, Syria, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina ended and the Ottoman state became an empire ruling over three continents. Until then, the majority of Ottoman subjects had been Christian; after 1517, most were Muslim. Under Selim's son, Süleyman I, and his grandson, Selim II (r. 1566–74), the Ottomans conquered Baghdad (1534) and spread into North Africa and the Maghreb mostly through indirect

---

⁹⁸ Lowry, *Nature*, 56–7, quotation on 57, taken from Aşıkpaşazade's description of the Ottoman conquest of Bursa.
⁹⁹ See, for example, Aeneas Sylvius and Florence Gragg, "The commentaries of Pius II," *Smith College Studies in History* 22 (1936–7), 1–2:68–85; books II–III, 25 (1939–40), 1–4:115–21, 195–9, 212–19.
¹⁰⁰ Franz Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 411, 500–1.

governance. It makes little sense to view the Ottoman destruction of the Mamluks as a mark of Ottoman desire to lead the Muslim world, let alone as part of an Ottoman holy war against infidels. The expansionist character of the Ottoman state, based as it was on raids for plunder (*akın*), and diplomatic mishaps between the Mamluk sultan Qanṣuh al-Ghawri and Selim I were more likely the causes of the Ottoman invasion of Syria in the first place. Historians, however, argue that once the conquest of Arab lands was completed, the empire adopted a more orthodox form of Islam and abandoned much of the pragmatism that had typified it during its early centuries as a European empire governing mostly Christians.[101] This is a plausible postulation: Not only did the area under its control more than double after the 1516–17 conquests; the empire also began to govern millions of new subjects, who practiced Islam differently and did not share many of the cultural and linguistic attributes of their new rulers.[102] When the Ottomans incorporated the Arab lands into their empire, they were still a pluralistic, tolerant, and multicultural empire. The conquest not only changed the Ottomans; it generated a sense of renewal in the Arab societies of the Middle East as well.

As in earlier conquests, the state sought to assert its authority soon after the conquest of Syria and Egypt. This was nowhere more apparent than in Ottoman architecture. Within a few years, the Ottomans erected public structures such as mosques and fountains in most of the cities they had captured.[103] The new structures in Syrian and Egyptian cities served a dual purpose: They asserted authority and patronage; and they demonstrated, through new architectural styles, Ottoman pluralism and ability to engage in a dialogue of cultures and traditions with the conquered people. Ottoman mosques in the Arab world incorporated elements of Seljuq, Byzantine, Central Asian, and pre-Ottoman Islamic architecture to create a unique blend, one that introduced the new masters to the area, but also retained enough of the local Mamluk architectural features.

---

[101] Heath Lowry, "Pushing the stone uphill: The impact of bubonic plague on Ottoman urban society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries," *Journal of Ottoman Studies* 23 (2004), 93–132 and especially 129–30; *Fifteenth Century Ottoman Realities: Christian Peasant Life on the Aegean Island of Limnos* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002), 1–4, 173–6.

[102] A testimony on the differences between Mamluks and Ottomans is found in Ibn Iyas's account of the last days of the Mamluks. The contempt he expressed toward the Ottomans was typical of the class of *awlad al-nas* (of which he was a member), Egyptian-born descendants of Mamluks who were not part of the military establishment. See Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad ibn Iyas, *Kitab ta'rikh miṣr al-mashhur bi-bada'i' al-zuhur fi waqa'i' al-duhur* (Cairo: Bulaq, 1893), 3:37–98.

[103] Watenpaugh, *Image*, 36–41.

In so doing, the Ottomans maintained practices from their fourteenth century days, when they had converted Byzantine churches into mosques and built structures that combined diverse styles of the region's architecture.[104] Through founding new institutions, the Ottomans introduced themselves to the conquered populations and invited their subjects to be part of a new cultural milieu.[105] The Ottoman policy of integrating the Muslim populations after 1516–17 was the same as that which had led them to embrace Christian-Byzantine culture in the fourteenth century, and to absorb Jewish exiles from Spain in the last decade of the fifteenth century.

In the empire's efforts to integrate newly conquered populations, Ottoman charity played an instrumental role. When the Ottomans were advancing into Byzantine territory in the fourteenth century, one way to introduce the overwhelmingly Christian population to the new order was through the building of soup kitchens, or *'imaret*s, in almost every town they conquered. *'Imaret*s were charitable institutions operating according to Muslim norms, but they were often set up in areas where no Muslims resided; even in the second half of the fifteenth century, some *'imaret*s served mostly Christians. The Christian clients of these *'imaret*s were already involved with the state through their participation in Ottoman campaigns. When they were not on campaign, the *'imaret*s provided them with food.[106] Lowry believes the *'imaret*s and dervish lodges served as melting pots for the Ottomans and the Christian populations they came to govern – for many it was within these institutions that they first encountered members of the other group. *'Imaret*s therefore offered a fertile ground for conversions to Islam.[107]

Islam was part of the culture the Ottomans sought to introduce, and charitable endeavors served to promote assimilation into their state. The *'imaret* and the *tekke* were something of a novelty in Syria and Egypt,

---

[104] Ibid., 42–3; Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 15–57, 161–96.

[105] To date, the best essay on cultural influences spreading along with Ottoman conquests and the role institutions such as dervish lodges played in this cultural integration is Ömer Lutfi Barkan, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda bir iskan ve kolonizasyon metodu olarak vakıflar ve temlikler" *Vekıflar Dergisi* 2 (1942), 279–386, and see especially 284–94.

[106] Heath Lowry, "Random musings on the origins of Ottoman charity: From Mekece to Bursa and beyond," in Nina Ergin et al., eds., *Feeding People, Feeding Power: Imarets in the Ottoman Empire* (Istanbul: Eren, 2007), 69–79.

[107] Lowry, *Shaping*, 82–3, 93–4. For another support for this view, see York Norman, "Imarets, Islamization and urban development in Sarajevo, 1461–1604," in Ergin et al., eds., *Feeding People*, 81–94.

being endowed as *waqf* by a sultan or by other high-ranking Ottoman officials. This was a change from Mamluk practice, in which the founders of *waqf*s had not been members of the Mamluk elite and their foundations had provided for only a small share of food distributions; the rest had been private initiatives. Only in times of shortage or famine would the rulers intervene.[108] The Ottomans let food- and bread-distributing institutions from the Mamluk period – schools, hospitals, public kitchens – deteriorate, thus creating a need for a new system of charity. In the decades after their arrival they introduced the *'imaret* and *tekke*, agencies that played a major role in the Ottomanization of Arab cities.[109] Soon afterward, by the mid-sixteenth century at the latest, grand charitable institutions began to be erected, complexes that included a mosque, a *tekke*, an *'imaret*, a school, and a hospital. By the end of the century, the Ottomans had transformed former Mamluk cities into Ottoman ones, where the great endowments the sultans had dedicated served as testimony to their power and generosity. They reshaped the ways charity was imparted in the Arab lands by making it more institutionalized.

Ottoman charity practices introduced certain novelties, such as periodic decrees that defined eligibility for charity. The principle of the "deserving poor" was not in itself new: Centuries before the Ottomans, Muslim communities, institutions, and individuals had ways to ensure that only those who deserved alms received them,[110] but the state did not usually intervene in such matters. From the sixteenth century onward, however, sultans issued orders to distinguish between able-bodied poor, who should work and not rely on charity, and those unable to work. Thus, in Istanbul two decrees from 1568 and 1577 clarified the need to support only the poor who could not sustain themselves through employment. In the Haseki Sultan endowed *'imaret* in Jerusalem, the *qadi* – a state agent – was to determine who could eat there.[111]

Such practices, however, were meant to ensure that those in greater need received help before those who could do without it. Unlike in Europe, they were not intended to resolve poverty. Furthermore, Ottoman charitable institutions were not quite state initiatives: Most grand mosques,

---

[108] Sabra, *Poverty and Charity*, 90–4.
[109] Astrid Meier, "For the sake of God alone? Food distribution policies, *takiyya*s and *imaret*s in early Ottoman Damascus," in Ergin et al., eds., *Feeding People*, 121–47.
[110] Mark Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 88–101; Sabra, *Poverty and Charity*, 38–40.
[111] Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence*, 64.

soup kitchens, and hospitals were started by a generous donation from a sultan, a member of his family, a grand vizier, or a provincial governor, but those who contributed did so as private individuals, not as state agents.[112] Imperial and provincial agents after the mid-eighteenth century tried to regulate charity more closely, yet no systematic Ottoman approach to the problem of poverty had developed before the second half of the nineteenth century, and no plans to combat beggary were introduced.[113]

The same was true of public health issues. The Ottomans were clearly more enterprising than their predecessors in improving cleanliness in cities, without necessarily making the connection between hygiene and disease. Up to the eighteenth century, such measures were taken mostly in Istanbul and its environs. The Ottomans launched ad hoc cleaning operations in parts of Istanbul soon after the 1453 conquest, and by the early sixteenth century they were regularly employing street cleaners, who collected garbage in receptacles and disposed of it in a central location. We do not know whether they took similar care of other cities, but it would make sense to assume that some sort of city cleaning system was in operation, initiated by the state, local governors, or private individuals. On the whole, however, the level of street cleaning before the mid-nineteenth century was apparently not very high; according to foreign observers, it was not close to European standards.[114] We also find sporadic cases of quarantine of travelers arriving from places suspected to have plague as early as the sixteenth century, and of foreigners arriving in Istanbul in the late-seventeenth century being detained for seven days before entering the city. In the eighteenth century, in various points along the Dardanelles, the Ottomans built houses known as *tahaffuzhane*, in which ships and their crews were isolated for many days before proceeding to Istanbul. Little is known about them and there is no evidence they were used elsewhere in the empire.[115]

The arrival of the Ottomans in the Arab lands, then, did not immediately change the outlook of the empire. But during the sixteenth

[112] Singer, *Charity*, 67–113.
[113] Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda sosyal devlet: Siyaset, iktidar ve meşruiyet, 1876–1914* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2002), 47–77.
[114] Mehmet Mazak, ed., *Osmanlı'da sokak ve çevre temizliği* (Istanbul: İstaç, 2001), 33–4, 58–67.
[115] Andrew Robarts, "A plague on both houses? Population movements and the spread of disease across the Ottoman-Russian Black Sea frontier, 1768–1830s" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2010), 204–5.

century the Ottomans gradually shifted their orientation and positioned themselves as a world and an Islamic empire. It was also the era where the state laid the bureaucratic and operational foundations for the ways it would handle future disasters. The Ottoman evolution from a principality in western Anatolia and their long interaction with Byzantium seem to have made them open to new ideas by the early sixteenth century. This can explain the increased number of treatises and fatwas on plagues from the sixteenth century that embraced the concept of contagion and condoned flight[116] and the strict control imposed on intramural burials in Istanbul, which from the last third of that century required special permission.[117] During the sixteenth century the state employed a reactive form of governing, issuing regulations from time to time but mostly refraining from intervening in matters until they were formally called to its attention. This may have resulted from the integration into the Ottoman military, bureaucracy, and religious establishment of many who had lived under the Mamluks in lands with a Muslim majority. As Islam began to play a key role in the empire, the state assimilated principles of prior Muslim rulers. Most prominent among these were the parallel distinctions between public and private, rulers and subjects.

The sixteenth century saw religious and social turmoil in Europe, created by the diffusion of novel ideas, the rise of new political structures, and more efficient prevention and containment of poverty and disease that had been developing since the Black Death. In the Middle East, change was somewhat less dramatic. The Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century experienced the crystallization of Ottoman bureaucracy in general, and the adoption of guiding principles for dealing with disasters, in particular. The language of Ottoman bureaucracy became inherently Islamic. And the practices reflected within it, whereby the state acted only when called upon (or when its prestige was on the line), shaped many of the empire's principles of disaster relief for the following two centuries. The non-Muslim influences, however, did not disappear completely. The years after the conquest of Syria and Egypt witnessed a process of diffusion of ideas in both directions. As the empire was solidifying its presence

---

[116] Nükhet Varlık argued for a dramatic change in the approach to epidemics from the sixteenth century (Nükhet Varlık, "Disease and empire: A history of plague epidemics in the early modern Ottoman Empire (1453–1600)" [Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2008]). See more on this in the next chapter.

[117] Nicolas Vatin, "L'inhumation intra-muros à Istanbul à l'époque Ottomane," in Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Les Ottomans et la mort: Permanences et mutations* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 157–63, and especially 162–3.

in the Arab territories in the sixteenth century, it underwent change while also transforming the society under its rule. And if the sixteenth century was an era of expansion, building, and establishing rule, the next two centuries would be a time of consolidation and implementation. In the following chapters, we will see what responses to natural disasters can teach us about the empire and its subjects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.