Meddling in the Post-Black Death Economy: Edward III's Policies to Repress the Peasantry

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1 INTRODUCTION

Open any medieval textbook and you will find that the fourteenth century is referred to as a period of 'crisis.' England, specifically, faced wars with France and Scotland, climatic changes, several devastating famines, and, of course, the Black Death[1;2;3]. Being a peasant in medieval England was no easy task, especially during such arduous times. Throughout the thirteenth century, there had been population growth, increased agricultural output, the development of widespread market networks, and the rise in the number of people dependent on the market for food[1]. It was a booming time. All of this expansion did not survive the chaos of the fourteenth century because, as Barbara F. Harvey notes, in the decades prior to the arrival of the Black Death, the "expansive economic trends of the earlier Middle Ages were first halted and then put into reverse"[4]. Population growth stalled and started to decrease with the Great Famine; laborers' wages were low; prices were high[5]. All this combined to make life rather bleak for the average peasants even before the arrival of the Black Death.

The Black Death originated in the Caucasus region in 1346 where it began to ravage the population. As people and goods moved west along trade routes, they brought with them the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*; Gabriele de' Mussis, from Piancenza, Italy, noted that "it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence, and their inhabitants, both men and women, died suddenly"[6]. By 1348, the plague was working its way across Continental Europe. Geoffrey le Baker, a clerk of Swinbrook in Oxfordshire, explains that "at last fierce destruction came to the countries beyond the Alps, and from there, in stages to western France and Germany, and in the seventh year since its beginning, to England"[7]. In the summer of 1348 sources report its arrival in England through the port at Melcombe in the southern county of Dorset. The Franciscans of Lynn chronicled the arrival of the plague and noted that "two ships…landed at Melcombe in Dorset a little before Midsummer. In them were sailors from Gascony who were infected with an unheard of epidemic illness called pestilence"[8]. From there, the plague began to spread northward and devastate all of England, as Geoffrey le Baker recorded:

> "First it virtually stripped a Dorset seaport and then its hinterland of the inhabitants, and then it ravaged Devon and Somerset up to Bristol. As a result, the people of Gloucester denied admission to people from Bristol, believing that the breath of those who had lived among the dying would be infectious. But in the end, Gloucester, and then Oxford and London too, and finally the whole of England were so violently attacked that scarcely a tenth of either sex survived[7]."

The plague ended its devastation in England a year after it arrived in the south[9]. According to sources such as Thomas Stubbs, the chronicler for the archbishop of York in c.1373, it finally reached the northern city of York in late May 1349 before dying out sometime in late July[10].

Coming on the heels of devastating famines and wars, the arrival of the plague only made life more difficult for the peasants. According to John of Reading, a monk of Westminster, "ulcers broke out in the groin and armpit, which tortured the dying for three days"[11]. Which, as the chronicler Robert of Avesbury notes, "remov[ed] them from human concerns in the course of a morning"[12]. While we know now that the Black Death killed somewhere between a third and a half of the population[3], people in the fourteenth century, surrounded by all the death at the time, were terrified. Some, such as the chronicler, Ralph Higden, estimated "that scarcely a tenth of mankind was left alive" by the time the plague ended. Thus, by the middle of the fourteenth century, in addition to the stresses brought on by the stagnating economy, English peasants were worried about dying, their family and friends dying, and what life they would have after the disease ended[13]. They had no idea if they

would survive the pandemic or what would be left of the world if they did.

If they survived the plague, however, peasants were actually presented with surprisingly robust economic opportunities. Land availability increased after the Black Death, allowing peasants to rent and cultivate larger plots. Laborers were in high demand and that gave them the power to negotiate for better terms and higher wages. After living with the difficulties of a declining economy and the plague, life seemed to be getting better. But that was not to be. The early promise of the post-Black Death benefits such as increasing wages, decreasing prices, improved standards of living, and increased personal freedoms, was not to be. Instead, wages rose for a short period after the plague before stagnating; prices rose and continued to rise for decades; standards of living only slightly improved; and peasants continued to be repressed. All this begs the question: why did the expected benefits of the Black Death prove to be so short-lived? Why did life not dramatically improve for the survivors? These are the core questions that this paper will seek to answer.

To answer these questions, it is necessary to look beyond the peasants and economic theories to another key actor of the time: the Crown. What becomes clear is that Edward III, king of England since 1327, and his ministers could not allow the economy to function on its own. With no concept of laissez-faire, they meddled with prices and wages, interfering with the natural ramifications of the mass mortality caused by the Black Death. What drove them to these actions? Above all, it was about maintaining the status quo, a system that the elites of society, the king included, had created to ensure their position in society. The king meddled with the economy by introducing new regulations in order to appease the elites, who faced financial and social losses after the plague. He did this because in the established social order he depended on the support of the aristocracy to govern as he pleased. Edward III had specific policy priorities in the mid-fourteenth century, such as controlling the economy and fighting France in the Hundred Year's War, which he could not undertake without the backing of England's elites. What I argue, therefore, is that it was Edward III's continued institutional repression of the peasantry in the wake of the Black Death that explains the failure of post-plague social and economic mobility. By maintaining the status quo via economic and legal measures, Edward III ensured the support of the upper echelons of society at the expense of the peasantry. In so doing, I seek to bridge the gap that exists in the current scholarship between economic history and politico-legal history. By examining the motivations of Edward III and the English aristocracy, I demonstrate both the centrality of the English crown to late medieval economics and the ways in which the goals and motivation of elites impacted the lives of people in every station, just as dramatically as any plague.

2 THE AFTERMATH OF THE PLAGUE

The Black Death spread quickly through England after its arrival in the summer of 1348, lasting about a year, and killing between thirty and fifty percent of the population[8;7;9;14;3]. This mass mortality impacted the peasants immediately. They had endured low wages and harsh working conditions throughout the first half of the fourteenth century due to high population rates and competition for work[5]. When the plague swept through England, the surviving peasants were presented with more opportunities for work and the possibility to negotiate for higher wages, which in turn gave them a chance for social mobility[5;15]. However, as I will discuss below, this rise in peasant influence was only short-lived. English elites worked to minimize the increased status of peasants to maintain the status quo as it had been for generations.

The mass mortality generated a higher demand for labor. In order to retain workers, employers had to pay more, and thus, peasants were able to secure higher wages. This was especially significant in agrarian areas because the lords needed tenants and laborers to work their land. Without enough tenants and laborers, not all the land would be worked and that which was worked would not have been taken care of at the same level as before the plague[16;17]. This meant that the food supply would not only decrease in the first year after the Black Death, but continue to be diminished in subsequent years, because the pre-plague levels of production were not recovered[16]. But even beyond this concern for subsistence, the landowners' were worried about the financial impacts the plague would have on their estates. They lost out on revenue from both rents and the sale of crops from their own lands due to the mortality of numerous tenants and the subsequent fall in agricultural production. According to an inquiry undertaken by the exchequer, for example, the Bishop of Worcester lost "£84 4*s* ½*d* [84 pounds, four shillings, and half a pence]… because of the lack of tenants who used to pay the rent and of customary tenants who used to perform the labor services" in the immediate aftermath of the plague[18]. This was a loss of nearly seventy percent of the expected income of that land ("£123 16*s* 2*d*")[18]; and that sum of just over £84 was the equivalent to at least 4210 days, or about 11½ years, of wages for a skilled tradesman[19]. When landowners then needed to pay more for labor, their income further decreased.

English elites were clearly displeased about having to pay their laborers more. The chronicler in Rochester noted that "such a shortage of workers ensued that the humble turned up their noses at employment, and could scarcely be persuaded to serve the eminent unless

for triple wages"[20]. This chronicler, one William de la Dene, a monk and member of the wealthy Cathedral Priory of Rochester, clearly writes from the perspective of the elites. The lowest in society, or the "humble," were expected to take whatever opportunities were offered to them by those higher in society, or the "eminent," because it was what had been done for generations. This division was, in fact, the bedrock principle of medieval society, which as Marc Bloch describes it, was "divided into three 'orders': those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked"[21]. Elites saw the peasant's demands for higher wages as an affront to this established order of society; from their viewpoint, the peasants were being greedy by trying to get more out of life than their position in society allowed for. Peasants saw the post-Black Death situation as a time to hope for a better life as more opportunities presented themselves. And so, they were able to do something new and make demands of the landholders which, if met, would have improved their standards of living. These changes in peasant attitudes towards the elites caused the landowners significant financial losses. Moreover, the economic changes in the wake of the Black Death also had the potential to result in a loss of social status for the elites and even the potential for complete societal upheaval. If the peasants could increase their standing in society, the difference between them and the elites would shrink, thereby diminishing the importance and power that the elites held in society[22]. Landowners, concerned with their own well-being in the post-Black Death economy and society, implored the king to help them maintain their status.

3 MEDDLING THE POST-BLACK DEATH ECONOMY

And Edward III did help the nobles. It is this move by elites and subsequently by the king to prevent a disruption of social hierarchy that can help explain the key conundrum regarding wages in the period after the Black Death that is at the heart of this paper. Despite the peasants leveraging their newfound power to get higher wages and opportunities for social mobility, the aftermath of the Black Death was not the beginning of a new social order. Wages rose for peasants, but only for a couple of years; then they remained stagnant for two decades[5]. In 1347, the wages for mowing and reaping wheat were 5d and 5¾d per acre, respectively; the wages for the same work in 1350 were 11d and 7¾d per acre. However, in 1352 the wages for mowing and reaping wheat were 6¼d and 6½d per acre, respectively; and those wages fluctuated very little until 1371 when the wages for that work were 8d and 11d[23]. What caused wages to stagnate this way when their rising seems so natural after the plague? Christopher Dyer, one of the foremost scholars in economic and social history of medieval England, offers a few potential explanations for this: perhaps, he argues, previously unemployed people filled the gaps left in the labor market after the Black Death. But this is unlikely because wages were not at rock-bottom prior to 1348. Alternatively, he suggests that "social and institutional restraints" worked to keep the wages down[23]. I would argue that this is far more likely to be the case, with the institutional restraints that Dyer refers to being the Crown's interventions in the labor economy to stop the rising wages after the plague. Edward III meddled with the English economy by introducing new regulations that disrupted the natural course of the impacts of the Black Death. He did this in order to maintain the established social order, which was upset when the peasantry gained more influence in society after the plague. The king was concerned with the lives of nobles and how they affected his own standing in society and his ability to govern; he was far less concerned with the lives of peasants. Edward III based his post-Black Death management of the English government and economy on these priorities. And so, though rising wages should have been an expected repercussion of the mass mortality, rather than a boost in their livelihood, peasants quickly found themselves repressed once more by the upper echelons of English society.

Intent on maintaining their finances and social status, the nobility wasted no time taking their concerns about peasant wages to the king, and he wasted no time drafting a response to the problem. In 1349, as the plague still ravaged England, the Crown issued the "Ordinance of Laborers," which ordered that "workers take only the wages, livery, meed, or salary, which were accustomed to be given in the places where he oweth to serve, the twentieth year of our reign of England, or five or six other commone years next before"[24]. This law was an attempt to reverse the rise in wages and return them to what they were prior to the Black Death. However, most of the country did not abide by this ordinance and wages continued to rise. In another attempt to force wages down, the Crown issued the "Statute of Laborers" in 1351[25]. This law was written to reiterate and enforce the "Ordinance of Laborers." The "Ordinance," in 1349, had relied on local and private enforcement, but the punishments of fines and jail times were not implemented effectively or consistently enough to thoroughly coerce peasants into accepting the lower wages[26]. As indicated by the issuance of a second rendition of the law, the widespread disobedience was noticed by the Crown and rising peasant wages continued to be a problem. The "Statute of Laborers" goes further than the "Ordinance" in that it specifies enforcement measures:

> "The said stewards, bailiffs and constables of the said towns be sworn before the same jus-

> tices that they will inquire diligently … about all those who act contrary to the ordinance, and that they will certify their names to the justices whenever they come into the area to hold their sessions, so that the said justices, having received the names of such rebels from the stewards, bailiffs and constables, may have them arrested to appear before the justices and answer for their offences, so that they may make a fine and ransom to the king if they are convicted, and over that let them be sent to prison, there to remain until they find surety that they will take employment and wages, and carry out their work … in the manner specified[25]."

This was a novel addition to the powers granted to local authorities and alike, as they were now tasked with seeking out offenders and punishing them, where they had previously only settled disputes that were brought to them[27]. The enforcement of the "Statute of Laborers" resulted in workers having to swear twice a year, in front of local officials, to obey the law and if they refused, they would be fined or jailed until they agreed, giving local officials more extensive authority over the local laborers[26]. It also established a greater system of cooperation between the royal government and local authorities, because they now had a task that required them to work together, rather than in opposition to each other. Because the power granted to them in the "Statute of Laborers" came directly from the king, the local officials now gained more authority; in a way, local officials became agents of national authority after the Black Death. In turn, the king gained more access to local networks of power, heightening his own central authority[26]. With the "Statute of Laborers," the king, with the cooperation of local authorities, was able to effectively suppress peasant wages, not just in the immediate aftermath of the plague, but for the next two decades.

The effects of the plague disrupted English society at a fundamental level. Peasants found a way to exert more influence in society than they ever had before, which undermined the system of oppression based on status that had been in place for generations. In order to prevent this trend of increasing peasant power from solidifying in English society, Edward III took active measures to maintain the status quo and appease his noble landholders. Despite a defiant labor force, he reissued failed laws attempting to restrict peasant wages and, by extension, peasant influence. He sought previously unheard-of powers from the local elites and, in exchange, helped entrench those same local elites. In fact, the Crown and the elites formed a balance of power so that they could both fulfill their needs while also supporting each other. In the wake of the Black Death, the nobles needed the king to help them maintain their estates because their power and wealth were being threatened. The king placated them with the new laws regulating labor because he needed the support of the nobles to implement his political agenda. In the middle of the fourteenth century, that agenda primarily included an attempt to more fully control England's economy and to defend and expand his holdings on the continent via war with France, both of which were a part of his central goal of maintaining and increasing his royal power. Neither the elites nor the king could accomplish their goals without the support of the other. Through a system of accommodations, the ruling classes of English society, king and nobles alike, were able to implement processes that maintained the status quo, even in the wake of the disaster brought about by the Black Death.

The ruling elites of England hoped to maintain their wealth, power, and status in society by inviting greater royal control into their economic affairs. At its core, these elites can be divided into two categories: the nobles and the gentry. The nobles were those who were granted land and titles by the king. The highest among them were the earls, who worked closely with the king and were often his friends, family members, and confidants. Below them were the various barons, who were distinguished from the earls by the size of their landholdings, their wealth, and their status – they were not as close to the king, though they still had considerable authority. When it came to politics, the nobles were those who made up the House of Lords in Parliament and had the most direct access to the king. By the end of the fourteenth century, there were about seventy noble families in England[27]. The gentry, then, sat below the nobles, in terms of social hierarchy. They consisted of all the landowners below barons but above yeomen (those peasants who owned their own farms and thus did not owe rent or labor on other men's land); even the lowest gentry would have typically owned enough land to have tenants. Each county throughout England typically had between fifty and seventy gentry families, from which the local officials, such as sheriffs, justices, and members of the House of Commons of Parliament, were chosen[27]. From local officials to the whole of Parliament, the nobility and the gentry comprised the entirety of the English political community. They not only excluded the peasants from the decision-making processes but maintained their own power and wealth by profiting off their labor.

The demographic changes in the wake of the plague threatened to upset the established societal structure, which the nobles and gentry were accustomed to controlling. It made sense for them to cooperate with the king's policies to control the situation because they received their authority from the king and thus believed in his power to preserve it. The nobles, especially, were

chosen by the king to hold a greater amount of power. In 1337, Edward III appointed an almost entirely new group of earls by filling posts that were left vacant due to the deaths of the previous earls and by creating six new earldoms[27]. With these appointments often came money and land. For example, Henry of Grosmont was named earl of Derby and was given both the lands typically associated with that title and "1000 marks yearly out of the king's customs"[28;27]. For both the nobles and the gentry, the political power granted to them by the king was key to their cooperation with him. Having a seat in Parliament gave them a say in the national government. It was in Parliament that laws were made. A common issue could be presented to them and then they would take it to the king; a statute would be written depending on the king's response, but it also had to have the assent of both the House of Lords and the House of Commons, the two branches of elite landholders, to become an official law. Parliament was also responsible for approving all direct taxations that the king requested[29]. The monarchy gave the elites of Parliament the power to approve taxes because direct taxation was an easier method of raising funds than holding them accountable to feudal obligations[29]. By doing this the Crown traded some of its power over the elites in order to collect more money from the realm in a simpler way. However, it did mean that if the king requested taxes too often or at too high of a rate, Parliament could refuse him. An early example of this is from 1297 when Edward I demanded a heavy tax, the earls refused him and blocked the collection of the funds until he was willing to confirm the charters of their land grants. Through this, the give-and-take between the Crown and elites is clear: the charters needed the king's approval to be legal documents and the earls held the purse strings[29;30]. During the first half of the fourteenth century, the overall power of the elites continued to grow as they became more central to the governing of England. It was the maintenance and growth of their wealth and power that was the fundamental concern for the nobles and gentry[31]. Because these largely came from the Crown via grants of titles, land, and opportunities for prestige, the elites were willing to cooperate with the king in order to ensure that they protected their power and place within the social order.

While it may seem as though the king was giving a lot of power without receiving much in return, that is not the case. In working with the nobles, Edward III gained support for his policies, funds from taxes, and increased central power. By the mid-fourteenth century, the elites throughout the country had essentially become an extension of the king's governance; this can be seen throughout the *Calendars of the Patent Rolls* when the king chose members of the gentry and nobility to carry out his directives, such as purchasing food and bringing it to London, collecting funds and supplies for the ongoing war, and overseeing the implementation of legislation and justice. But, all of this came with strings attached. Each decision Edward III made regarding his elites was politically calculated in order to maintain political stability. By the mid-fourteenth century, the English Crown could do very little without the support of the elites because the established system required consensus amongst those in power; kings who did not acknowledge this found themselves in political crises. Perhaps the best example of this is when King John lost the support of his barons by asking too much from them and was forced to sign the *Magna Carta* in 1215[32]. Edward III understood this when he appointed his new nobility in 1337. He chose people for those positions that he specifically believed would understand his decisions and be loyal to him throughout his reign[27]. The nobles and gentry needed to feel important to the king and the governance of the country. Edward III gave this to them by granting them the authorities that were so important to them. As long as he could keep them satisfied with their positions in society, he knew that he would have their support. If he did not, or if he pushed too hard against their power and privileges, he knew that they would turn against him. He had become king at the young age of fourteen, because the elites turned against his father, Edward II, in a coup led by the powerful baron Roger Mortimer and Queen Isabella. Edward II had favorite nobles to whom he granted immense power and privileges, which combined with poor economic decisions and military failure led the rest of the elites, in the countryside as well as in the city of London, to turn against him and support his deposers[31]. The first three years of Edward III's reign were then ruled by his mother as regent with Mortimer as her main advisor. It was only after Edward III staged his own coup in 1330 that he took control of the government[27].

Throughout his reign, therefore, Edward III worked consistently to retain the broad support of England's elites and to avoid the fate of his father. In the wake of the Black Death, this was no different. The elites were displeased with the increased influence that the peasants attempted to take hold of because it could have meant their societal downfall, which could have, in turn, led to the end of Edward III's reign if he did not address the situation. So, Edward III implemented policies, such as the "Ordinance" and "Statute of Laborers" to reinforce the societal status quo. If, in the quest for maintenance of the established social order, elites sought to retain their power and authority, Edward III, in turn, sought to retain support for his policies. Each side gained what was most important to them, the implications of which can be seen in his tactics to more fully control England's economy and to defend and expand his holdings on the continent via war with France, both of which fundamentally depended on elite

support.

As seen above, the immediate economic effects of the Black Death, such as the rising wages of laborers, the decreased agricultural production, and the reduction of rent income resulted in an overall loss of profits for landholders. The "Ordinance" and "Statute of Laborers" were both efforts to counteract these effects, because, as noted by W.M. Ormrod, the king was concerned with recreating "the economic conditions that had prevailed before the plague"[22]. In the decade prior to the plague, the king and the elites had managed an economic system that brought them prosperity; they cooperated to ensure both their needs were met in terms of power and wealth for the nobles and gentry and adequate elite backing for the king[33]. When, after the Black Death, the peasants began to push against the established system, it upset not only the elites but the king as well. In fact, the *Calendar of the Patent Rolls* mentions the king "resist[ing] the sloth and malice of servants who when others died in the pestilence seeing the necessity of their lords would not serve them unless they received excessive stipends"[34]. This parallels the sentiment of the nobility that the Rochester chronicler captured when writing about the peasants seeking higher wages[20]. Peasants were viewed by the Crown, nobles, and gentry alike as being selfish; they refused to continue working for the same low wages as before the plague because they were going against the system that the elites had built to benefit themselves. Maintenance of the status quo in agrarian areas mattered to the king, not only in order to appease the elites, but also because he was a landholder himself, and was, therefore, directly impacted by the peasant demands for higher wages. He was, in fact, the largest landholder in the realm. Technically, the monarchy owned all the land in England since the Norman Conquest, but that was not a feasible system to operate under. It was during the reign of Henry II that the system for managing the Crown's estate that Edward III used was established. The king would grant pieces of the royal estate through tenurial arrangements to royal servants whom he wished to elevate in status, such as when he appointed new earls. By the mid-fourteenth century, the most important grants of the royal estate were to endow other members of the royal family, so the majority of those lands were still connected to the king. Because of just how much land the king owned, even with such grants, he still had the largest land holdings in the realm[35;36]. Therefore, the economic issues created in the aftermath of the Black Death were of concern to Edward III both because he had to keep his elites satisfied with their economic status and wealth and because it directly impacted the management of his own lands and familial lands which reflected his own status, power, and wealth in the country.

The king's efforts to institute greater economic controls also extended to the control of prices. Beyond any ideological element, Edward III might have noticed that higher wages often meant higher prices and, therefore, believed that artificially lowering the wages would also lower the prices of foodstuffs. Knighton recorded in 1349 that "the necessities of life became so dear, that what in previous times was worth 1d. now cost 4d. or 5d"[9]. This inflation was yet another economic consequence of the Black Death. We have seen how the spread of the plague decreased agricultural production, which in turn caused the food supply to be diminished below the necessary levels to sustain the population. Price inflation, therefore, seems like a natural response to having less supply than demand; however, medieval England did not function with the theories of a modern market-based economy. It functioned with the medieval economic concept of balance: stable wages and prices meant that the system was working as the elites had built it to. Rising wages and rising prices in the wake of the Black Death signaled a substantial disruption to the established economic system. Because economics and politics were inseparable, Edward III felt the need to use his economic power, which was theoretically absolute, to control both wages and prices in order to reestablish balance within the economy[37]. One of the king's attempts to lower prices was the issuance of two statutes in 1351, the "Free Trade Statute" and the "Statute of Forestallers"[38]. Combined, these two laws protected free trade without interference and punished anyone who forestalled (buying victuals before they reached the market, intending to resell them later at a higher price)[1]. Edward III's goal with these was to decrease the prices of foodstuffs[1]. That, however, did not take place. Grain prices remained high for years after the issuance of these laws. From the early 1340s to the early 1370s, grain prices rose by forty-three percent. When wages were on the rise, the rise in prices would have meant that the real wages were about the same as prior to the Black Death[39]. Instead, because wages were forced down by the Crown, the real wages actually decreased, leaving the peasants worse off than were before the plague. These policies were not successful in driving down prices as Edward III had intended, which meant that he would have to find other ways to control the economy. However, the success of the labor regulations balanced out this failure and gave the king and the elites enough control over the economy to placate their needs for power over the peasants for decades to come.

But it was not just out of a concern for the maintenance of the social structure that Edward III tried to control the economy, he also had another specific economic agenda tied to his political agenda: the Hundred Years' War. By the time the plague arrived in 1348, Edward III and Philip VI, king of France, had been at war for just over ten years, only the beginning of what would be a century-long ordeal. There were two major points of

contention between the French and English monarchs: longstanding feudal land issues and the succession of the French throne. The English kings had been the noble lords of Aquitaine since the eleventh century, but beginning in the middle of the thirteenth century, a series of French kings had slowly but relentlessly seized that land, until it was fully under French control, thus making the English kings nobles under the French kings. This situation and the ensuing land disputes created a strained political situation between the two countries because one monarch cannot be beholden to another monarch and retain the same level of power. Adding to this was the dispute over the French throne: Edward III had a strong claim to it when his uncle, Charles IV died with no direct heirs, but the French chose Philip of Valois as his successor instead. Political tensions between the two countries came to a head in 1337 when Philip VI seized Aquitaine, which was the property of the kings of England in their role as dukes since the twelfth century, and in retaliation, Edward III declared himself king of France[2]. For the remainder of his reign, the war would be a key priority for Edward III because war was a good way to manage the balance of power between himself and the nobles.

Edward III quickly learned that making war is expensive. Throughout the war, the English had troops on the continent in Gascony, their last major crown holding on the continent, and in Calais, which they captured in 1347, just before the arrival of the plague[2]. Those troops required routine supplies to keep the war effort going. Calais and Gascony were both heavily dependent on England for victuals, which the Crown had to pay for[2]. Even though the royal government paid less than the market price, the prices were still, to some extent, regulated by the market. Therefore, the king was concerned with changes in the market[40]. The rising prices after the Black Death meant that the royal government would have to pay more for the supplies needed for the military. Thus, Edward III's efforts to diminish wages through the "Ordinance" and "Statute of Laborers" was based on a desire to reduce grain prices, not just because he was worried about having to pay more at home, but because he was worried about having to pay more for victuals to supply the military efforts of the Hundred Years' War.

The two main ways by which the Crown raised supplies were purveyance and taxation. Purveyance was when officers of the central government would go to a county, as specified by the king, to purchase a designated number of victuals for lower than the market price, and the counties were required to provide these supplies[40]. The king would regularly issue purveyances to supply the war effort. For example, in January 1347 the king issued a "licence [sic] for Bernard … to take from the port of Sandwich 700 quarters of wheat … to Gascony for the sustenance of [the] men there in the king's service"[41]. Taxation, on the other hand, was the principal way in which the Crown made money. The lay subsidy was the tax levied to finance the war; it was not levied every year, but once the Hundred Years' War began, it became a considerable burden for the peasantry, even before the additional challenges in the aftermath of the Black Death[5]. However, Edward III would not have been able to fund his war in this way without the support of England's elites. Taxes could not be levied without the approval of the nobles and gentry in Parliament, and he needed local officials to collect the victuals ordered in each purveyance[29]. The English elites supported the king's war with France and allowed the burdensome taxations and purveyances to fund it because participation in the war helped them achieve their fundamental goal of maintaining and growing their wealth and power. Just as Edward III was seeking additional political and economic power by going to war with France, so too were the nobles and gentry who supported him. The give-and-take structure of the political sphere in England was crucial to the king's war-making efforts. Neither side could, therefore, afford to lose wealth, land, and power over the peasantry, which was the consequence if they refused to cooperate in their political endeavors.

Beyond financing the war, the king also needed soldiers and military leadership to wage war. The nobles and gentry were crucial both for the skills as soldiers and their role in raising and leading troops from across England. By the mid-fourteenth century, the king and elites could no longer require their tenants to serve in the military based on feudal obligations, instead, they had to convince them to join in other ways. The gentry were pivotal to the recruitment of foot soldiers for the war because they were both in positions of authority and had access to the masses; the recruiting agents would emphasize the pay and potential for material rewards from fighting to convince men to enlist voluntarily[2]. The nobles and gentry themselves participated in the war in positions of leadership. Those in higher positions of social standing typically had higher ranks in the military, but the war also presented an opportunity for advancement. If a knight or lesser noble performed well in the war, their social status could be elevated from the prestige and material goods won in the war[31]. One of the best examples of how knights earned prestige is with the creation of the Order of the Garter. In 1349, amidst the chaos of the plague, Edward III formed the Order of the Garter "made up of himself and his sons and the bravest and noblest in England," as Jean Froissart, an important chronicler of the Hundred Year's War, explained it[42*]. Twenty-four knights were

*There exists some debate over the actual founding date of the Order. Froissart states that the Order of the Garter was formed in 1344, but modern historians typically put its founding in 1348 or 1349. Despite this discrepancy in dates, the Order was still an important

chosen as the founding members of the Order, all of whom contributed to England's military victory against the French at Crécy in 1346. Membership in a chivalric order provided incredible prestige and glory to a knight, not least of all, proximity to the king himself, which is what all elites sought when fighting in war[43]. The king thanked those who were successful in battle for furthering his agenda by rewarding them with political advancement. The elites' monetary gains of war came mainly from significant booties and ransoms because they were not paid salaries the way foot soldiers were. Because of the ample possibilities to increase one's social standing through fighting, war became the principal activity for many elites during Edward III's reign. It was important to them to take any opportunity that they could to increase their authority and wealth because the more powerful they were, the more secure their position was in society for themselves and their children[31]. It was the promise of glory, prestige, and profits for both the king and the elites that guaranteed their cooperation throughout the war.

The Black Death and its mass mortality, however, nearly stopped the war; military activity paused from 1348 to 1355[2]. Nonetheless, the troops in Gascony and Calais remained, and continued to need supplies from England. As we have seen, after the plague, agriculture production in England diminished dramatically and that impacted the Crown's ability to collect victuals. For example, in July 1350 the king appointed "Roger Larcher to purvey 1000 quarters of wheat, 500 quarters of oats, 200 carcasses of [beefs] and 200 bacon pigs in the counties of Southampton and Wilts … to bring the same to Gascony for the king's lieges there," however, the order was "vacated and nothing was done thereof"[44]. Roger Larcher was unable to complete the purveyance because of the food supply shortage that began in the wake of the Black Death. This, however, did not dissuade Edward III from continuing purveyance efforts. In early October 1350, "Nicholas Lambe [was appointed] to purvey 40 quarters of wheat, 80 quarters of oats and 20 cartloads of hay, in the counties of Southampton and Wilts, for the passage to Gascony"[45]. There is a stark contrast in the number of supplies required between these two purveyances. Such a difference is due to the king being made aware of the hardships caused by the Black Death and having to lower his expectations. The elites responsible for collecting the first purveyance would have made it clear to him that victuals in that amount could not have been provided without causing undue hardship on the local peasants and the elites themselves. In other words, the elites could not support the larger purveyance requirement, so the king lowered his demands because getting fewer supplies with the support of the elites was better than getting no supplies with the elites against him.

Edward III, however, could have stopped purveyances altogether, allowing his people to keep their food supplies and recover after the Black Death faster. The fact he did not do this indicates that the war with France was a greater priority than any concerns over domestic welfare. For the king, the fight against the French kings was a part of a larger effort to maintain and elevate his social standing. The French monarchy was seen as the aggressor, attempting to take what was rightfully Edward III's through his lineage[2]. It is clear just how important it was by the fact that he denied the chance to become the Holy Roman Emperor, "saying that he would rather seek his rights" to the lands and throne in France[9]. Additionally, throughout the more general sources from the period, we can see how the war had become a fundamental component of Edward III's reign. In *Knighton's Chronicle*, the pages before and after his discussion of the Black Death are about the ongoing war[9]. And, even amidst his points about the plague, Knighton comes back to the war. For example, after telling of deaths in Avignon, he states that "in the mean time the commons of Flanders … gained Bruges by deceit, and beheaded and hanged those Flemings whom … supported the king of England." Then, "King Edward assembled his army"[9]. By the time the plague arrived, the war was, in fact, a part of the status quo. And, therefore, it was expected that it would continue. The king had invested most of his political clout into the continuation of the war and was not going to give it up simply because the Black Death caused delays. The elites, also, continued to need the war to support their insatiable desire for power and wealth. However, they were unable to do this unless they continued to control the peasantry; if the peasants did not continue their agricultural work as they had before the plague, society would lose its basic functionality, and the elites, therefore, would be unable to pursue their higher goals.

All of this shows that the Crown's intervention in the post-Black Death economy and government was a tactic to further the king's own agenda. Edward III meddled with prices and wages to repress the peasantry and retain the nobles' support both for the Hundred Years' War and more broadly. By doing this, the Crown prevented the natural economic responses to the Black Death. We can therefore see how the peasantry was connected to elites and the Crown in the Middle Ages. Without peasants doing their work in the lower parts of society, the upper echelons of society could not function as they were used to. The king and elites had a system in place that allowed them both to pursue their goals without encroaching upon each other. The Black Death, and its impacts on peasants, disrupted that system. The economic regulations put in place by Edward III in the wake of the plague were intended to continue the

creation of the mid-fourteenth century, highlighting the value of chivalry in Edward III's royal government and agenda.

repression of the peasants so that the elites and the king could maintain their status quo and their pursuit of power, prestige, and wealth.

4 CONCLUSION

The Black Death occurred in the middle of a tumultuous century and only added to the chaos. The disease itself killed at least a third of the population in England, which had dramatic effects on the society and economy. The peasants that survived the pestilence were presented with the potential to improve their lives. The king and elites, displeased with the changes in the peasantry's status, worked to counteract their gains in order to preserve the status quo from before the Black Death. Edward III meddled with the economy by regulating prices and wages, which halted the peasants' advancements. This was all in an effort to maintain the established social order that underpinned the king and his aristocracies' working relationship, a relationship that allowed them each to pursue power and prestige, all the while, controlling and limiting the peasants. The natural ramifications of the Black Death, therefore, were not able to play out in the ways that we would have expected them to. When there is a struggle between natural economics and governmental policies, the Crown wins to the detriment of the peasants.

By the mid-1350s, England probably thought that they were done with the plague and its impacts, but unbeknownst to them, they would face three more outbreaks before the century was over. The brief taste of power that the peasants got after the Black Death would not be forgotten, and neither would the policies implemented to repress them. When writing of the impacts of the "Statute of Laborers," Knighton noted that it meant that wage-earning peasants "served their masters worse than ever before"[9]. Moreover, the ramifications of the first outbreak would continue to reverberate for decades to come. The "Statute of Laborers" would be enforced throughout the second half of the fourteenth century. This set the stage for the growth of states' ability to legislate and intervene in the lives of peasants which, combined with other encroachments on peasants' lives, contributed to pushbacks against the status quo of the elites. The most notable of these would be the 1381 Peasants' Revolt, the culmination of grievances that had their origins in the aftermath of the 1348 outbreak of the plague.

In studying the aftermath of the Black Death, we can see the way that the various systems that make up a society interact. Nothing happens in isolation. One person, or one place, or one event is always connected to countless other pieces of society. This is how the impacts of the plague on grain production could be connected to the king passing labor regulation, which was, in turn, connected to a personal political war across the Channel. Peasants, gentry, nobles, and royalty were all linked together when the Black Death devastated England, and when one of them sought to change their position in society, all the others were impacted and had to react. The complex intertwining of society can seem simple in a time of stability, but its true colors come out during crises.

Crises, such as the Black Death, expose the elements of a society that impact and inform governments' decisions. It all comes down to who has the power and what their priorities are. As we have seen, in fourteenth-century England, the king, the nobles, and the gentry held the power; peasants, while the base of society, had no palpable authority. This meant that despite their slight gains immediately after the plague, the peasants were always at the mercy of the elites. It was the elites' perpetual quest for power, prestige, and wealth that guided the implementation of the new economic regulations. Very little concern was ever given to the peasants and their livelihoods. And so, peasants continued to be held down by the powerful elites, even though the crisis could have been a time of change.

When we look at the Black Death today it is hard not to draw parallels with our own crises. The current coronavirus pandemic is one of only a few pandemics that have occurred in the past seven hundred years since the Black Death. We could attempt to use this study of the plague and its impacts on society to analyze the predicament that faces our world now, but the modern disease and the world it impacts are drastically different from their medieval counterparts. Despite those differences, we look for explanations, for ways to understand what is happening in the world around us. One way this study of the Black Death might be used to understand the coronavirus pandemic is as a reminder that government priorities do not always align with the priorities of its constituents. We see how governments around the world are attempting to manage the impacts of the disease and we are already facing the economic and political consequences. Just like in the fourteenth century, the way forward will be determined by the complex interchanges of power that drive our modern world.

5 EDITOR'S NOTES

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