The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages (1300-1450)

Or “The Calamitous 14th c.”
Introduction
Why the “calamitous 14th c.”?

From historian Barbara Tuchman’s *The Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th c.*

Her thesis: when the gap between the ideal and the real [in society] becomes too wide, the system breaks down.
Essential Questions & Objectives

Questions:
- In what ways was the 14<sup>th</sup> c. “calamitous”?
- To what extent is Tuchman’s thesis accurate?

Objectives:
- Recognize the geography of Europe in the later Middle Ages.
- Identify events that have resulted in the use of the term “calamitous” to describe the 14<sup>th</sup> c.
- Describe the social characteristics of the 14<sup>th</sup> c.
Geography
Geography of Europe in 1300

Europe = many small states!!

Major states at this time:
England  Scotland  Norway
Sweden   Portugal  Denmark
France   Bohemia (= Czech Republic today)
Austria  Teutonic Order (= Baltic states today)

Do not yet exist as we know them today:
Spain = Castile, Aragon, Granada, Navarre; not united
Italy = Sicily, Papal States, + others; not united
Germany = not united; part of Holy Roman Empire
Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg = the Low Countries
Russia = group of principalities; Mongol Yoke (1237-1480)
Nations of SE Europe = part of Byzantine Empire
Europe in 1400
Geography of Europe in 1400

From 1300-1400 states consolidated their holdings = fewer small states

**Major states at this time:**
- England: Union of Kalmar = Norway, Sweden, Denmark
- Scotland
- Poland
- Lithuania
- Portugal
- Bohemia
- France
- Hungary
- Austria: Wallachia (= Romania today)
- Ottoman Empire

**Do not yet exist as we know them today:**
- Spain, Italy, Germany = still not united
- Russia = still under Mongol Yoke (1237-1480)
Events

In what ways was the 14th c. “calamitous”?
(1) Great Famine (1315-1322)

From the Apocalypse in a *Biblia Pauperum* illuminated at Erfurt around the time of the Great Famine.

Death sits astride a lion whose long tail ends in a ball of flame (Hell). Famine points to her hungry mouth.
Causes

- price inflation
- terrible weather

In 1315 the price of wheat rose 800%.

In 1303 and 1306-1307, the Baltic Sea froze!
Consequences

- ↑ susceptibility to disease
- later marriage
- ↓ population
- ↑ homeless
- rich farmers buy out poor farmers
- volatile land market
- unemployment
- migration of young males to towns
- ↑ crime

- Int’l trade = consequences spread far
- Gov’t. responses ineffective

Dürer’s Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1497-98)
The Disease Cycle...The Plague

Flea drinks rat blood that carries the bacteria.

Bacteria multiply in flea’s gut.

Flea bites human and regurgitates blood into human wound.

Flea’s gut clogged with bacteria.

Human is infected!

**bubonic** = spread by flea

**pneumonic** = spread human-human
Causes

- famine ↑ susceptibility to disease
- advances in shipbuilding
- Genoese traders carry black rats from the Crimea
- urban overcrowding & poor sanitation
The Symptoms

Septicemic Form: almost 100% mortality rate.
Consequences – Economic

- ↓ unemployment
- craft guilds take new members
- inflation
- ↑ productivity, wages, & standard of living
Consequences – Social

- pogroms against Jews
- merchants endow hospitals
- migration
- clergy care for sick
- Approx. 25 million die

The burning of Jews in 1349
Consequences – Psychological/Cultural

- pessimism
- art & lit – theme of death
- flagellants
- new colleges & universities – more localized
- culturally Europe becomes more divided

Dance Macabre (Hans Holbein)
(3) Hundred Years’ War (ca 1337-1453)

ENGLAND VS. FRANCE

Battle of Sluys (1340). Illustration from a manuscript of Froissart’s Chronicles.
Causes 1: Controversy over succession to French throne

- Charles IV of France dies heirless
- French nobility selects **Philip VI of Valois**
- Chosen over **Edward III of England**
  - “no woman or her son could succeed to the [French] monarchy”
- 1340 – proclaims himself King of France
Causes 2: French land belonging to British monarchy

- English claim Aquitaine as ancient inheritance & occupy it as vassal to French crown.

- Philip VI confiscates Aquitaine in 1337.
Causes 3: Struggle for French national identity

- France disunited
- French vassals of Philip VI side with Edward III to assert independence from French crown
Causes 4: Wool trade & control of Flanders

- Wool trade b/t England & Flanders
- Flanders = French fief
- Flanders wants independence from French rule & asks English for help
Height of English Dominance, 1429
Consequences

- **England**
  - development of parliament (Commons)

- **France**
  - physical destruction
  - unified France

- **Both**
  - economic problems
  - social discontent
  - nationalism
France becomes unified!

France in 1337

France in 1453
(4) Church in Decline
Babylonian Captivity (1309-1376)

- Pope in Avignon
- Popes lives extravagantly
- Rome left in poverty

Clement V
Great Schism (1376-1417)

- 2 popes!! (Rome & Avignon)
- Gregory XI brings papacy back to Rome
- Urban VI (Rome) – aggressive reform causes anger & second election
- Clement VII (Avignon) – “antipope”
Great Schism divides Europe politically
Conciliarism: Theory

- Reform movement
- Pope derives power from entire Christian community
- Constitutional structure: pope + general council

Marsiglio of Padua

John Wyclif & Lollards
Conciliarism: Practice

- Council of Pisa (1409) → 3 popes!!
- Council of Constance (1414-1418) – 3 goals:
  1. end Great Schism
  2. end heresy
  3. reform church
(5) Fur collar crime

- Nobles attack rich and poor to raise money
(6) Peasant Revolts

Jacquerie (1358)

- Causes:
  - Long-term socioeconomic grievances
  - 100 Years War – taxation
- Result: Crushed by nobility

English Peasants’ Revolt (1381)

- Causes:
  - Long-term socioeconomic grievances (Statute of Laborers freezes wages)
  - Urging by preachers
  - 100 Years War – French raids
  - Head tax on adult males
- Result: Crushed by Richard II but serfdom disappeared by 1550
Life went on even in the face of calamity.
What did 14\textsuperscript{th} c. society look like?

Society
Marriage & Family

- Arranged
- Based on economics (vs. ♥)
- Age: men in mid-late 20s, women <20
- Children = objects of affection
- No divorce (annulments in rare cases)

Prostitution

- Legal & regulated
- Not respected
- Urban
Race & Ethnicity on the Frontiers

- Migration of peoples to frontier regions
- “race”/“ethnicity” = used to mean language, customs, laws (vs. blood)
- Legal dualism: natives subject to local laws & newcomers subject to laws of former homeland
  - Ireland as exception
- As time passed, moved away from legal dualism toward homogeneity & emphasis on blood descent
Vernacular Literature

- Dante, *Divine Comedy* (Italy)
- Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (England)
- Villon, *Lais & Grand Testament* (France)
- Christine de Pisan, *The City of Ladies*, etc. (France)
- ↑ lay literacy – due to needs of commerce & gov’t.