The Black Plague and the Conception of Death

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The Black Plague spread through Europe in the middle of the 14th century, annihilating, within a few years, half of the population of the continent. Contemporary scholars view the Plague as one of the most important events in the Middle Ages. Different aspects of the Black Plague were studied, but to the best of my knowledge, my work is the first to study how people's conception of death had changed by this catastrophic event. In this project, I examined the changes in the conception of death in England as reflected by two different characteristics of society: tombs and poems, dated from a century before the plague (1250s-1350s) to a century after it (1350s-1450s). These items were examined by methods of contextual analysis and art criticism. I found that before the plague, death was viewed in a religious context: people mainly thought of Heaven and Hell, and were heavily preoccupied with these ideas. After the plague, people turned more concerned with secular matters of this world, such as the pains of dying and the decay of the body. I suggest that this change occurred, at least partly, due to the plague, through which painful death was both a constant and an immediate threat, and decaying bodies were to be found everywhere. This research contributes a unique point of view to the study of human nature and the coping of human societies with extremely traumatic events and the collapse of known social order.

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