

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

EPISODE 120: THE END OF THE WORLD

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EPISODE 120: THE END OF THE WORLD

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 120: The End of the World. In this episode, we’re going to continue our look at the social and linguistic upheaval of the mid-1300s. And specifically, we’re going to look at the devastating plague known as the Black Death. It was one of the worst plagues in human history – perhaps the worst. It killed about one out of every three people in Europe, and when it reached the English shores, it turned English society on its head. Most scholars agree that the Black Death was one of the major factors that led to the end of feudalism in England. The social and economic structure imposed by the Normans three centuries earlier started to break down. The new system that emerged in its place put an emphasis on the use of English for the first time since the Conquest. So this time, we’ll explore those developments, and we’ll see how the French language was one of the many victims of the Black Death in England.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, I want to look at one of the most tragic events in human history – the great sickness that swept through Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s. It wasn’t the first plague to hit Europe, but it was certainly the most devastating since the collapse of the Roman Empire. It’s almost impossible for us to comprehend the massive loss of life that occurred within a very short period of time.

Societies deal with the circle of life all the time. No society is immune from death. And a certain amount of attrition is to be expected. Usually, as individual citizens pass away, the institutions of society continue on without interruption. But there is a breaking point. There’s a point at which so many people die within such a short period of time, that the society can no longer cope with the consequences. There aren’t enough people to grow food, to provide basic goods and services, to operate the government, to pay taxes, to provide protection. There aren’t even enough people to bury the dead. When that happens, those traditional institutions of society break down, and a new social order has to be cobbled together from whatever remains. That was what happened in England and much of the Europe in the mid-1300s. And that is why this event is so important to modern historians. Almost every aspect of society was affected. The economy, the social structure, the Church, the language. They were all fundamentally changed by this massive plague and the tremendous loss of life that resulted.

That is why many historians link the Black Death with the collapse of the feudal system in western Europe. And over the next couple of episodes, I’m going to discuss how these two important events are fundamentally connected. Of course, our primary focus will be on the linguistic consequences of the plague, and in that regard, there were both immediate direct consequences and long-term indirect consequences.

The long-term consequences had to do with the collapse of the traditional social order which had been imposed by the Normans. That social order was ruled by a small nobility who valued French and Latin over English. When that social order collapsed, the power of those nobles declined, and the power of the traditional English-speaking classes increased. And with that shift in power and influence, English was once again embraced as the primary language of the country. So again, in that regard, the English language was a beneficiary of these larger social and economic changes that were taking place.

But in this episode, I want to focus on the more immediate and more direct consequences of the Black Death. When the plague hit England in 1348, there was an immediate impact in the churches and schools of England. The church was one of the hardest hit institutions because priests performed the last rites on the dying. So they were constantly exposed to the contagion. Monasteries were also confined to institutions where the plague quickly spread from person to person. So within a couple of years, many of the educated clerics who were trained in Latin and French died out. Many of these clerics also served as teachers, and when they died out, that left the schools with a shortage of teachers who spoke Latin and French. Many of the new teachers who replaced them only spoke English. And that allowed English to re-emerge as the dominant language in the schools of England. So this time, we'll focus on those immediate developments. And next time, we'll explore some of the more long-term consequences.

Since this episode will focus on the plague and its consequences for the schools of England, I wanted to begin by taking you back to a poem that I've mentioned in a couple of earlier episodes – most recently in Episode 102. This is a poem about the disappearance of English from the schools of England after the Norman Conquest, and it survives in the handwriting of the scribe who is known as the Tremulous Hand because of his shaky writing style. We don't know if he composed the poem or simply copied it from another source, but it is a very emotional account of how the English language had been pushed aside by the Norman conquerors. Specifically, it laments the fact that English students were no longer being taught in their native language. Here is the main part of that poem in Modern English just to remind you of the sentiment. It reads:

Saint Bede was born here in Britain with us
And he wisely translated books so that the English
People were taught through them
Abbot Aelfric whom we call Alcuin
Was a writer and translated five books
Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Numbers, Leviticus
Through these were our people taught in English
These people taught our people in English
Their light was not dark; it glowed fairly
Now is that teaching forsaken and our people lost
And another people teaches our folk
And many of our teachers are damned
And that folk with them.

I wanted to read that poem again because it reflects the overall state of education in England from the time of the Conquest until the arrival of the Black Death in the mid-1300s. It shows how English was perceived as a peasant language – a local vernacular not worthy of formal education or serious literature.

Having said that, we also know from prior episodes that English was making a comeback in the 1200s and early 1300s. Most people in England now spoke English as a first language. French was still the prestige language, and the nobles and other elite still tried to learn French because it was so valued, but it was clearly experiencing a decline.

In the last episode, I mentioned how the English king, Edward III, tried to stop the decline of French by encouraging the members of Parliament to teach it to their children. He said that it would benefit them when they went off to war. So in that case, we see that even the nobles had to be encouraged to preserve the use of French.

Well, the churches and monasteries were experiencing similar problems. In most cases, the monks weren't allowed to speak English. They were expected to speak Latin or French. But most of the monks spoke English as their first language, so it was common for them to speak to each other in English. That irritated the abbots and other clerics who were in charge. So in the 1200s, the Benedictine monasteries at Canterbury and Westminster specifically prohibited the use of English, and they required all conversations to be in French. [*Source: History of the English Language – Cable/Baugh, p.138-9.*]

This same problem was also occurring in the schools. Most grammar schools were essentially church schools tied to a particular church or monastery. And as we just saw, teachers generally lectured in French. And students were taught to read and write in Latin. This same approach was extended to universities. And again, students were expected to converse in those educated languages – not English. But those rules were starting to be ignored. The universities tried to stop this trend, and the only way they knew how to do that was to prohibit the use of English altogether, just like many monasteries had done. So in the 1320s, several colleges at Oxford adopted specific rules that 'encouraged' students to converse in Latin and 'allowed' them to converse in French, but they were absolutely prohibited from speaking English. Peterhouse College at Cambridge adopted similar rules.

All of this reflects the relative state of English and French at the time. Elite institutions throughout society required a knowledge of French or Latin, and those institutions did all they could to preserve that knowledge, even if it meant prohibiting the use of English.

Around the same time that those university restrictions were being adopted, a monk named Ranulph Higden was working on a history manuscript which covered the entire history of the known world. Higden called the manuscript Polychronicon, combining the Greek roots *poly-* meaning 'many' and *khronikos* meaning 'time.' *khronikos* is also the root of words like *chronicle* and *chronology*. So Polychronicon literally meant 'many times,' and the manuscript was called that because it was a chronicle that covered many different periods of time.

Despite the Greek-sounding name, the manuscript was composed in Latin as was common at the time. Higden began the document in the 1320s, and it wasn't completed until the 1350s shortly after the Black Death. So the work on the manuscript continued for nearly three decades. Higden actually stopped working on the project at some point during that period, and one or more other scribes took over and completed the manuscript.

Now early on in the project, Higden composed an entry in which he discussed the state of education and state of the English language at the time. This passage was composed around the year 1326 – a couple of decades before the Black Death arrived in England. And it's an incredibly fascinating passage because of what it tells us about language and education in England immediately prior to the plague that killed so many people. About 60 years later, the original Latin chronicle was translated into Middle English by a cleric named John of Trevisa. In fact, I actually quoted part of Trevisa's translation in an earlier episode because the manuscript passage contains one of the more memorable statements about the differences between southern English and northern English.

This was the passage where Higden wrote that the people of southern England couldn't understand the people of the north, and he described the northern form of English as "strange stammering, chattering, snarling, and growling gnashing of teeth." Of course, Higden was from the south of England, and he considered the northern form of English to be inferior to his native dialect. But Higden said that the state of the entire language was poor at the time. After making that statement about Northern English, Higden attempted to explain why English was in such bad shape. Here is a Modern English translation of Higden's original comments:

"This impairing of the birth-tongue is because of two things. One is because children in school, contrary to the usage and manner of all other nations, are compelled to forsake their own language, and to construe their lessons and [name] their things in French, and have [done so] since the Normans came first into England. The second reason is because the children of nobles are taught to speak French from the time that they are rocked in their cradle, and know how to speak and play with a child's toy; and uplandish or ambitious men who would like to present themselves as if they were noble men, try with great effort to speak French in order to be more highly thought of."

Now here's the same passage in Middle English from John of Trevisa's translation:

Dis apeyryng of þe burþtonge ys bycause of twey þinges. On ys for chyldern in scole, aōenes þe vsage and manere of al oþer nacions, buþ compelled for to leue here oune longage, and for to construe here lessons and here þinges a Freynsch, and habbeþ suþthe þe Normans come furst into Engelond. Also gentil men children buþ ytauōt for to speke Freynsch fram tyme þat a buþ yrokked in here cradel, and conneþ speke and playe wiþ a child hys brouch; and oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylf to gentil men, and fondeþ wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more ytold of.

So Higden's point here is that the emphasis on French over the prior two and half centuries caused English to be neglected. And he suggests that the lack of formal education in English caused the English language to deteriorate – leaving it in a fractured state to the point that the people in one part of England could barely understand the people in the other part. There was no fixed standard that everyone learned and was expected to adhere to. So English was allowed to drift and evolve to reflect the whims of each community.

As I noted earlier, Higden stopped working on his chronicle at some point, apparently in the 1340s. And after then, one or more other scribes continued to work on it through the early 1350s. So it was continued through the events I described in the last episode. In its summary of the year 1346, the chronicle contains a brief entry about the English victory over the French at Crecy. The text then refers to the siege and capture of Calais on the northern coast of France which I mentioned at the conclusion of the last episode.

I thought it might be interesting to examine this passage about the capture of Calais. Here is the passage in Modern English. It reads:

“King Philip of France came around the feast of St. Bartholomew near to Calais in order to dissolve the siege, but in the morning he fled, leaving his tents full of vittels – or food. The men of Calais perceived that, and they yielded the city to the king of England, who tarried or remained there and disposed of the city at his pleasure (in other words, ‘put the city in order as he pleased.’) After a month, he returned to England.”

Now here's the same passage in Trevisa's Middle English version:

Philippe kynge of Fraunce come abowte the feste of seynte Bartholomewe nye to Calese, as to dissolve that sege, but in the morowe he fledde, levynge his tentes fulle of vitells. Men of Calyse perceyvynge that, yeldede that cite to the kynge of Ynglonde, whiche taryenge þer and disposynge that cite after his pleasure by a monethe, returnede into Ynglonde.

Now the syntax and grammar of that passage are largely the same as Modern English. Most of the vocabulary is also preserved in Modern English. In translating that passage from Latin into Middle English, Trevisa used the word *vittels* for food. That word is derived from the Latin word *victual* which meant food. The word passed through French where the ‘c’ or ‘k’ sound in the middle was usually dropped, so it ended up as *vittels*. And that's how English borrowed the word. It was in common use in the 1300s, but today *vittels* mostly survives in rural American dialects. And even there, it is largely seen as an old-fashioned word.

The passage also gives us ‘in the morrow’ – or ‘in the morning.’ *Morrow* also gave us the word *tomorrow* which really evolved out of this original sense of the next morning.

Now these passages about the English victories at Crecy and Calais are immediately followed by the following passage. In Modern English, it reads:

“Then a great mortality and death of men followed thogh the world, beginning from the plagues of the south and of the north, so that scarcely half of the people remained alive.”

Here’s the Middle English version:

“Whom a grete mortalite and dethe of men folowede thro the worlde, begynnyng from the plagis of the sowthe and of the northe, that unnethe the halfe parte of men remayuede on lyve.”

Now this is obviously a reference to what we know today as the Black Death, but in jumping from the capture of Calais in the summer of 1347 to the arrival of the Black Death in the summer of 1348, the chronicle skips over about a year of history. And that year is very important because that was the period in which the plague first appeared in Europe and spread across the continent. By examining the surviving accounts from that period, modern scholars have been able to piece together where the plague came from, how it spread, and why it killed so many people in such a short period of time.

It appears that the Black Death was ultimately caused by a combination of factors that came together at just the right time to produce a massive death toll. Let’s begin by noting that it was a disease, and the word *disease* was a brand-new word in the English language when the Black Death arrived. *Disease* is recorded for the first time in the year 1330. The word was borrowed from Latin via French, and as I’ve noted before in an earlier episode, the word *disease* is literally ‘dis-ease’ or the lack of ease or comfort.

The root of this particular disease was an infection of the lymph nodes called the bubonic plague. This plague was caused by a bacterium that was carried by rodents – especially black rats. Over the centuries, black rats have been largely replaced with brown rats in much of Europe, but black rats were the more common variety in the 1300s. And they were common throughout Europe and Asia.

This kind of plague is called the ‘bubonic’ plague because it produces what are called *buboes* which are large swellings in the lymph nodes, especially in the groin, armpits, and neck. These *buboes* are filled with pus and other fluids, and they can reach the size of eggs. Once contracted, bubonic plague was very deadly. Well over half of all persons who contracted bubonic plague ultimately died from it. Some estimates suggest that the death rate was as high as 90%. And death usually occurred in 4 to 7 days. So it was a lethal disease, but it wasn’t really contagious. People didn’t give bubonic plague to each other. It had to come from the bite of an infected animal, and that included rats.

Even though rats were common in Middle Ages, and rat bites happened, they weren’t common enough to spread the disease across all of Europe in two years – wiping out over a third of the population in the process. So there had to be another factor. And that second factor was fleas.

The bubonic plague was also spread by infected fleas. Certain species of fleas were attracted to the fur of the black rat. The fleas would bite the infected rat and acquire the plague bacteria, and then the fleas would jump to humans and infect the humans. That allowed for a much more rapid expansion of the disease. But even so, in its basic form, the spread of the bubonic plague still required a bite. And if the disease had been limited to bubonic plague, the overall impact and death rate would have probably been much lower. But there was another even more deadly phase called pneumonic plague.

The pneumonic plague is really just the bubonic plague combined with pneumonia. Instead of settling in the lymph nodes, this version settled in a person's lungs, and that meant that it could be spread through coughing, sneezing, and in some cases, through breathing and speaking. In that respect, language itself was partially responsible for the spread of the disease. Once the disease reached this stage, it became a true contagion. Merely coming in contact with an infected person was enough to contract the disease. And given the growth of towns and cities, there were lots more people living together in close proximity. So that allowed the disease to spread rapidly throughout a village, town, or city.

Now I should note that there is still ongoing research into the factors that contributed to the Black Death. What I just presented is the traditional view that has developed over the past couple of centuries, but it is still subject to some refinement, and some experts believe that other factors were also at work. Recent research suggests that fleas may have spread the disease from person to person – not just from rats to people. As you may know, the study of insects is called entomology, and I'm much more comfortable discussing etymology than I am entomology. So I'll stick with the traditional view, but the important thing to understand is that the Black Death wasn't simply bubonic plague. It was a combination of diseases that were all ultimately derived from black rats that were infected with the plague bacteria. The disease evolved and took different forms and became more deadly as it spread to humans.

I should note that the bubonic plague wasn't new in the 1300s, and it didn't disappear after the 1300s. There was actually a massive outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe several centuries earlier near the end of the Roman Empire, and many scholars believe that that earlier outbreak contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. So this type of plague has haunted humanity for centuries. But that begs the question, why was the outbreak of the bubonic and related plagues in the mid-1300s so bad? Why did it kill so many people in such a short period of time? And why did it encompass so much of the known world when earlier outbreaks tended to be confined to specific regions.

Well, this is where a final important factor comes into play. And that factor was the rise of medieval trade routes that linked almost every major town and city from China to the British Isles. Since the mid-1200s, the east and west had been fundamentally linked by these trade routes that carried merchants and goods across Europe and Asia.

In an earlier episode, I explained how the massive Mongolian Empire linked those two regions like never before. Most of the east-west trade was conducted along the trade route known as the Silk Road. As goods headed west from Asia, they eventually reached the Black Sea and the

Mediterranean. From there, other trade routes carried the goods to Italy, and from there into France, and across France to Flanders and England. And as I noted at the beginning of the last episode, Venetian merchants had started to send ships to England and Flanders via the Atlantic Ocean and the English Channel. So all of these regions were linked in ways that they had not been a couple of centuries before.

And that was really the final piece of our puzzle. If the bubonic plague reached those trade routes, it could quickly spread throughout the known world. And that's exactly what happened in the 1340s.

Now the ultimate origin of this plague is shrouded in mystery, but most modern scholars agree that it began in the Eurasian steppe region – the same region where the Proto-Indo-European language had its ultimate origin several thousand years earlier. Rodents in that region tended to carry the bubonic plague, and they still do to this day. That included rats and marmots. Marmots are a type of rodent that live in the steppe region, and unlike rats, people actually wanted marmots. They were captured and sold for their hides. They were also traded along the Silk Road to merchants from both Europe and Asia.

One theory is that the hides of infected marmots – which also contained infected fleas – were boxed and sent to the port city of Kaffa on the northern coast of the Black Sea on the Crimean Peninsula. That port city is known today as Feodosia, but it was once called Kaffa. No one knows for certain if the plague arrived in Kaffa via marmots or rats or some other rodent, but the Black Death made its first known appearance there in the year 1346. And given that marmots were traded out of that port, they seem like a logical source of the plague.

An Islamic writer named Ibn al-Wardi recorded that traders told him the plague arrived in Kaffa in later half of 1346. That would have been a few months after the English victory over the French at Crecy. So in our overall time line, the arrival of the plague in the Black Sea region would have been around the same time as the events I discussed in the last episode.

Now Kaffa had become a major trading base thanks to merchants from Genoa in northern Italy. They built a trading settlement there, and it soon became a Genoese trading base. And again, it appears that that trading settlement at Kaffa was the point of contact where the bubonic plague reached one of those major trading routes of the late Middle Ages.

An Italian writer of the period named Gabriele de Mussis provided a written account of what happened. According to his account, some Genoese merchants in the region got into an argument with Mongol forces who controlled the surrounding territory. The merchants retreated behind the city walls of Kaffa for protection, but the Mongols besieged the town. During the siege, the plague hit the Mongol forces who were gathered outside of the walls. Perhaps some of the boxes containing infected marmot hides were opened, thereby releasing the fleas on the unsuspecting Mongols. But again, no one knows for sure. According to de Mussis's account, the Mongols who were besieging the city started to die in great numbers. He wrote that the Mongol leader directed that the corpses of the men who died be catapulted into the city. So many Mongols were dying that they soon lifted their siege and pulled back. The merchants inside the city took

advantage of the opportunity and fled to their ships to sail back to Italy. But it was too late. Some of the merchants and sailors had already contracted the disease. And like all ships of this period, the Genoese ships were infested with rats, and the rats had fleas, and some of those fleas spread the disease among the humans on the ships.

According to de Mussis's account, this group of ships made several stops on their way back to Italy, and the plague soon appeared in each one of the port cities where the ships docked. So supposedly, this fleet of ships was the immediate cause of the Black Death in Europe. Now it's a fascinating story, and it may have the added benefit of being true, but de Mussis based his account on the stories that were told to him by others, and it is doubtful that one specific fleet of ships did all the damage. Again, these were very active trade routes, and the Black Death was highly contagious. It spread at a rate never seen before. So it is likely that there were numerous ships spreading the disease.

Based on surviving records, it appears that the disease reached Constantinople in the spring of 1347. A few months later, it was killing the people of Sicily and southern Italy by the thousands. Once the disease found its way into a port city, it spread outward from the city at a rate of about 2.5 miles per day. At that rate, it didn't take long for an entire region to be affected.

Over the following winter and spring, the plague continued to spread northward along the Italian coast. Venice, Florence, Genoa and other parts of northern Italy were soon impacted. And in those regions, writers started to provide vivid accounts of the plague.

A tax collector in Sienna, Italy recorded a first-hand account of the disease as it arrived. His name was Agnolo di Tura, and here is a portion of his account in Modern English:

“The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing. . . . It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied seeing the pain. It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. They died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura ... buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city. There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed that it was the end of the world.”

[Source: *The Plague in Siena: An Italian Chronicle*, Agnolo Di Tura, 1348.]

From Sienna, the disease spread north to Florence. And the arrival of Black Death in Florence was vividly captured by a writer named Giovanni Boccaccio. His account of this period is contained in a book called The Decameron. It is one of the most famous accounts of the Black Death in Europe.

The book is the story of ten noble men and women who flee the city of Florence to escape the plague. To pass the time, they tell each other stories, and the book is a collection of their respective tales. Now if that sounds vaguely familiar, it should. It is the same approach that Geoffrey Chaucer used in the Canterbury Tales which is a collection of stories told by various pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. And that probably is not a coincidence. As I noted in the last episode, Chaucer was an English envoy and diplomat during the Hundred Years War. And at one point, he spent some time in northern Italy. Many scholars think that he became aware of Boccaccio's writing during that period and that the Canterbury Tales was specifically influenced by the Decameron.

Now around the same time that the plague reached northern Italy, it also reached the southern coast of France. From there, the Black Death spread westward across southern France to Gascony – the region that was held as a vassal state by the English king Edward III. Gascony was located in the southwestern corner of France, and the main city in the region was Bordeaux. And by August of 1348, the plague was ravaging the city. And this is where the storyline of the Black Death intersects with the storyline of the English nobility.

Edward III had just made a marriage alliance with the king of Castille in what is today northern Spain. Castille was located just south of Gascony, and Edward wanted Castille to be a strong ally in his ongoing war against the king of France. So Edward agreed to a marriage between his daughter Joan and the heir to the kingdom of Castille. This was a good old-fashioned marriage alliance, and it was ultimately another chess move in the larger war with France.

So Edward's daughter Joan and her entourage boarded four ships in England and headed for Castille. The plan was to stop at the port of Bordeaux in Gascony. From there, they would disembark and continue overland to Castille. So the ships headed for Bordeaux at the exact same time that the city was experiencing the first outbreak of the Black Death.

Bordeaux was located along the west coast of France, and there was also a royal palace there. Joan and her entourage planned to stay there for a few days before continuing on to Castille. But when the English ships arrived in the port, the mayor of Bordeaux greeted the fleet and tried to encourage them to continue their journey without lingering in the city. He told them that the city was being ravaged by a plague and bodies were piling up in the streets. Unfortunately, the English officials ignored the warning. They had just come from England which had not yet been affected by the plague. So they had no idea how serious the situation was.

As it turned out, the royal castle was located near the port where the rat-infested ships came and went. It was one of the worst places to be in the summer of 1348. Within a few days, the members of Joan's entourage started to die one by one. And a short time later, Joan herself became sick, and she died a short time later.

Messengers were sent back to England to inform Edward that his daughter and much of her entourage had died in Bordeaux. Needless to say, Edward was devastated by the news. He sent a group of men to Bordeaux to recover Joan's body and bring it back to England for a proper burial, but the body was never found. No one can say for certain what happened to her body, but it is very likely that she was buried in one of the mass graves along with the thousands of other people who died in the city. It is important to remember that she was the daughter of the English king Edward, and Edward held Bordeaux as part of Gascony. And Edward also claimed the title of King of France, and at this point after the victory at Crecy, it looked like he was about to make that claim a reality. So one would think that his daughter's body would have been preserved and guarded with utmost care. But it wasn't. And that shows just how quickly the societal norms broke down when people started to die by the thousands. The Black Plague didn't really care who you were or who your father was. And the people who were left behind struggled to dispose of the dead and get through the day without becoming victims themselves. It didn't really matter if you were a princess or a pauper.

Around the same time that Bordeaux was hit by the plague, it also struck Paris. It is estimated that 50,000 people died in Paris when the Black Death first arrived there in the summer of 1348. And remember that Paris of the mid-1300s was a much smaller city than it is today..

By the end of the summer, the disease had crossed the English Channel and finally made its first appearance in England. It was first recorded on the southwestern coast of England around Southampton, presumably brought by ships that docked in the local ports. The disease quickly spread throughout the southwest of the country during the fall, and by winter it had reached London. By the spring and summer of the following year, it was ravaging the central and eastern counties. (MAKING OF ENGLAND TO 1399, p. 336+) In the following year, it consumed the north of England and Scotland.

The devastation was unimaginable. Exact numbers are not known for certain, but prior to the Black Death, England may have had as many as 6 million people. It has been estimated that around 2 million of those people died in this first major outbreak. So about one-third of England's population succumbed to the disease. Some estimates suggest that the percentage was even higher. In fact, it took four centuries for England's population to recover and return to the levels that had existed prior to the Black Death. The population finally reached the 6 million figure again in the mid-1700s. So the overall numbers are remarkable.

By the way, the death rate was basically the same throughout Europe. About one-third of the population of Europe died from the Black Death – somewhere in the range of 20 to 25 million people overall. [Source: *The Great Wave*, David Hackett Fischer (p. 41-45)] Some estimates suggest that the rates were even higher in France and Italy where as much as half of the population may have died.

And it's important to remember that those are averages. The actual death toll varied from one region to the next. Some towns and cities experienced death rates well over 50%. Many smaller villages were completely wiped out. Not a single resident survived. In those cases, the villages

ceased to exist. Some estimates indicate that England lost as many as 1300 villages to the Black Death. [Source: *Life During the Black Death*, John M. Dunn]

Of course, the manors of England were also affected. On some of the manors, everyone died. On others, there were a few surviving peasants, but no lord. Some manors had the opposite problem. There was a surviving lord, but no peasants to work the land or tend the crops. This situation had major social and economic consequences, and it ultimately brought an end to the feudal system itself which I'll discuss in more detail in the next episode.

For now, it's important to note that the massive death toll created its own problems. With a lack of people to tend the farms, the crops rotted in the fields, and the livestock either died from disease or neglect or they roamed the countryside with no one to tend to them. That meant that food production plummeted during this period which only added to the death and misery.

And the survivors couldn't rely on traders from other communities because they were also affected – or maybe I should say that they were also 'infected.' Traders used the same trade routes and the same ports where the disease flourished, so they were especially vulnerable to the disease.

This was the situation described in that passage from Polychronicon that I read earlier in the episode. John of Trevisa's Middle English translation described it as 'grete mortalite and dethe of men' – a 'great mortality and death of men.' This term 'The Great Mortality' was a common term for the disease that ravaged Europe during this period. It was a term borrowed from French. The outbreak was also referred to as 'the Plague' or 'the Pestilence' – both loanwords from French. Sometimes, it was simply called 'the Death' using a native English word. But it wasn't called 'the Black Death' – at least not yet.

The term 'Black Plague' first appeared in the 1600s, and 'Black Death' appeared in the 1700s. There are two different theories about why the disease came to be called the 'Black Death' or 'Black Plague.' One theory is that it was such a dark and miserable period, that the word *black* was used to describe the general mood that prevailed at the time. The other theory is that it is based on a physical ailment caused by the plague. Victims often experienced bleeding under the skin that appeared as huge black splotches. So the 'Black Death' may have been a reference to that common condition. Either way, it has become the accepted term for this outbreak of plague in the mid-1300s.

Whatever it was called, it devastated almost every community it encountered. It didn't discriminate between rich and poor, noble and commoner, or believer and non-believer. In fact, religious communities were some of the hardest hit. And that was true at all levels. England had a tough time keeping an Archbishop of Canterbury because so many died during the three years of the Black Death.

John de Stratford was the archbishop when the plague arrived, and he died around the time the plague made its first appearance in England, though he didn't actually die from the plague. He had been sick for a while before he died. The next choice was John de Ufford, but he died of the

plague before he could be consecrated. Next up was a prominent English scholar named Thomas Bradwardine. He was the personal chaplain of the king, Edward III. He had even accompanied Edward to the battle of Crecy and preached at the mass after the victory. He was consecrated as the new archbishop in July of 1349. But a month later, he developed a high fever. Then came the dreaded buboes and black welts. He died five days later.

The lower clergy didn't fare much better. In fact, modern scholars have determined that the death rates were higher among the clergy than in the society at large. About a third of the general population died, but it appears that nearly half of the clerics fell victim to the disease. [*Source: The Great Wave, David Hackett Fischer (p. 41-45)*]

Part of the reason for this high mortality rate was because clerics were expected to hear confessions and provide the last rites to dying persons, so that put them into direct contact with infected victims. So many priests died that many churches stopped having services.

Monasteries and nunneries were also highly impacted. Anywhere where people congregated, the death toll soared. Since monks or nuns lived together as a community, they were especially vulnerable when the disease struck. And the disease was a constant threat because sick people often went to those facilities for medical care and aid. The net result is that the church was one of the hardest hit institutions in England.

Most of the clergy were educated in Latin and French. The church was also the source of much of the education in England. Most of the grammar schools were associated with a church or monastery, and that's why the schools were staffed with teachers who spoke Latin and French. But now, nearly half of those clerics and teachers were dead. And there was a desperate need to find replacements.

Generally speaking, the church looked to younger member of society. Rules were changed to allow priests to be ordained at the age of twenty rather than twenty-five. Monastic vows were allowed to be administered at the age of fifteen rather than twenty. These changes produced an influx of younger priests and monks. But many of those younger recruits had very little, if any, formal education. Most of the new clergy could only speak English. They couldn't speak French or Latin, and many could barely read and write at all.

Nevertheless, the massive death rate created opportunities for those people, and some of the replacement clerics rose to prominent positions as priests and abbots and prioresses. They were very different from their predecessors. They valued English, and many of them actually encouraged the use of English in schools and monasteries.

And this brings us back to where we started – with that historical chronicle called Polychronicon. I noted at the beginning of the episode that the chronicle was composed by Ranulf Higden before the Black Death occurred. And I read the passage where he attributed the poor state of English at the time to the fact that there was no formal education in English. I also noted that the original Latin text was later translated into Middle English in the late 1300s after the Black Death had passed. John of Trevisa made that English translation, but when he got to the passage about the

lack of education in English, he felt that the sentiment was misleading because things had changed so much since Higden composed the original passage about 60 years earlier. So Trevisa decided to add in a new passage with some personal comments of his own. He wrote that the educational system had changed in England since Higden wrote the original text. He said that teachers abandoned French after the plague, and they started to teach in their native English.

Here is that passage added by Trevisa after the plague. It immediately follows the original passage that described how French was required in schools. In Modern English, the new passage reads:

This manner was much used before the first plague, and was later somewhat changed. For John Cornwall, a master of grammar, changed the lore (or teaching method) in grammar school and changed the construction of French into English; and Richard Pencrych learned that manner of teaching from him, and other men from Pencrych, so that now, the year of our lord 1385, being the ninth year of King Richard's reign, in all the grammar schools of England children leave (or abandon) French, and construe and learn in English, and have thereby an advantage on one hand, and a disadvantage in another. Their advantage is that they learn their grammar in less time than children were accustomed in the past. The disadvantage is that now children of grammar school know no more French than they know their left heel, and that is harmful for them if they should pass across the sea and travel in strange (or foreign) lands, and in many [other] cases also. Also gentle men have largely stopped teaching their children French.

Now here's the same passage in Trevisa's original Middle English:

Pys manere was moche y-vsed tofore þe furste moreyn, and ys seþthe somdel ychaunged. For Iohan Cornwall, a mayster of gramere, chayngede þe lore in gramerscole and construccion of Freynsch into Englysch; and Richard Pencrych lurnede þat manere techyng of hym, and oþer men of Pencrych, so þat now, þe ðer of oure Lord a þousond þre hondred foure score and fyue, of þe secunde kyng Richard after þe Conquest nyne, in al þe gramerscoles of Engeland childern leueþ Frensch, and construeþ and lurneþ an Englysch, and habbeþ þerby avauntage in on syde, and desavauntage yn anoþer. Here avauntage ys þat a lurneþ here gramer yn lasse tyme þan childern wer ywoned to do. Disavauntage ys þat now childern of gramerscole conneþ no more Frensch þan can hire lift heele, and þat ys harm for ham and a scholle passe þe se and trauayle in strange londes, and in meny caas also. Also gentil men habbeþ now moche yleft for to teche here childern Frensch

So Trevisa confirms that grammar schools in England abandoned French and reverted to English after the Black Death. For the first time since the Norman Conquest, English was once again the official language in the schoolrooms. And that was a major step toward the return of English as the unrivaled language of England.

He attributes this change to two educators – John Cornwall and Richard Pencrych. It isn't known for certain who these people were, but surviving records indicate that there was a man named

John Cornwall who taught Latin grammar in Oxford at the time of Trevisa's translation. Both his name and Pencrych's name appear in the records of Merton College at Oxford. So it appears that these two men had a connection to Oxford. And it also appears that their early innovations in English teaching quickly spread throughout the country and became standard by the year 1385.

It also appears that this trend was extended to the universities as well. During this same general time frame, Oxford adopted a rule that required teachers to teach in French as well as English "lest the French language be entirely disused." So the universities were still trying to preserve a place for French alongside English, but it was ultimately a losing battle.

Ironically, in the passage where Trevisa says that English replaced French in the schools, he uses a lot of French words. And that shows how English continued to borrow French words even though formal education in French was abandoned. In the short passage I just read, Trevisa uses the following French loanwords: *manner, used, changed, master, grammar, school, second, Conquest, pass, travail, strange, cases, advantage* and *disadvantage*. In fact, this is the first known use of the word *disadvantage* in an English document. He also provides the first recorded use of the French word *construction*. The passage also contains the word *construe* which was borrowed directly from Latin. And to describe the plague itself, Trevisa uses the French word *moreyn* which was borrowed into English as a term for an infectious disease, but isn't used very much today.

Now overall, the Middle English passage I just read is very close to Modern English. The grammar and syntax are very similar, and the vocabulary is mostly modern. It shows how much the language had evolved in the three centuries since the Norman Conquest.

The main differences between this passage and Modern English are the pronunciation of the words and the spelling of the words. The Great Vowel Shift had not occurred yet, so these words still had the older vowel sounds. And spelling was still phonetic. It tended to vary from one scribe to the next. The passage also continues to use that Old English letter thorn (þ) for the 'T-H' sound. It looked sort of like a 'p' with the circle in the middle of the line rather than at the top of the line. The other unique Old English letters had stopped being used by this point, but the thorn (þ) survived. It didn't really disappear from English until the invention of the printing press which lacked that letter.

Interestingly, there are a few cases where Trevisa wanted to double that sound. In other words, he wanted to spell a word with two back-to-back 'T-H' sounds. For example, in one passage, he used the word *subþe* for 'since.' And in the passage I just read, he used *seþþe* for 'later.' In both words, he used a thorn (þ) for the first part of the sound and 'T-H' for the second part. He spelled *subþe* – S-U-þ-T-H-E. And he spelled *seþþe* – S-E-þ-T-H-E. So even though thorn (þ) and 'T-H' were two different ways of representing the same sound, Trevisa sometimes used them together. That suggests that the two were somewhat interchangeable at the time. So that made it easy for English writers to drop the thorn (þ) altogether when the printing press came about. They were already using 'T-H' to represent the same sound, so they didn't really need the thorn (þ) anymore. So it disappeared from English in the 1500s.

Also, in the passage that I read at the beginning of the episode, Trevisa said that ambitious men tried to speak French ‘in order to be better thought of’ – or as he wrote “for to be more ytold of.” So here, he ends the sentence with the preposition *of*. Now, today, we’re told that it is bad English to end a sentence in a preposition, but that rule hadn’t been adopted at this point in the 1300s. So here we can see that it was in fact common to end a sentence in a preposition in Middle English, and it’s still common today, despite the technical rules of English grammar.

Trevisa’s translation of Polychronicon reveals a great deal about the state of English in the late 1300s, but perhaps the greatest thing it reveals is that the Black Death had elevated the role of English in schoolrooms across England. Three years after the plague arrived in England, it subsided, and this first massive wave of death came to an end. The plague would return over the next few decades, but it was never as severe as this initial outbreak from 1348 to 1351.

One immediate consequence was a new generation of English-speaking clerics and school teachers, many of whom didn’t speak French or Latin and had little interest in learning those languages. But this was only a small part of a larger transition that was taking place within English society. For those who were fortunate enough to survive the plague, many experienced a general increase in power and wealth. Suddenly, there was a lot of unclaimed land, and there was an increased demand for labor. The poor down-trodden peasants found themselves in a position where they were able to bargain and negotiate for their services. That gave them a degree of power and wealth not seen since the feudal system arrived, and it was the beginning of the end of the feudal system itself. With the rise of these traditional English-speaking classes, there was also a rise in the prestige of the English language.

Over the next decade, English would become the official language of the courts and of Parliament, thereby giving English an official status that it hadn’t enjoyed since the Conquest. These changes took place in conjunction with the ongoing Hundred Years War with France. So we really start to see how the war and the plague broke the hold that French had on English society. These events started to push French to the margins, and it paved the way for English to return as the dominant language of England.

Next time, we’ll explore some of the developments that took place in the decade after the Black Death subsided. We’ll see how English benefitted from the disruptions and devastation left in the wake of the plague. And we’ll see how English once again became the language of the English government.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.