

## CHAPTER 11 SUMMARY

The fourteenth century was an era of crisis. A “little ice” age led to famine, but a greater disaster followed: the Black Death. The bubonic plague was spread by black rats’ fleas, carrying the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, while the pneumonic variety was transmitted through the air from person to person. It originated in Asia and reached Europe in 1347. In a few years up to 50 percent of the population died, with higher mortality rates in urban areas. It returned every few years for centuries.

Reactions differed. Some escaped into alcohol, sex, and crime. Others, believing the Black Death to be a punishment from God, attempted to atone for their sins through self-inflicted pain. The Jews became scapegoats. In the wake of the Black Death, artists frequently portrayed subjects of death and decay based on the *ars moriendi*, or the art of dying, as exemplified by Francesco Traini’s fresco, *The Triumph of Death*. People fled, carrying the plague with them. The resulting labor shortage could benefit peasants, although the demand for products was also reduced. When the ruling classes reduced wage rates there were peasant revolts. The ruling classes quelled the revolts, but social upheaval continued to plague the post-plague world.

Wars were also part of the crisis, notably the Hundred Years’ War between England and France. In 1328 the French Capetian line ended. England’s Edward III (d.1377) claimed the French throne, but a cousin to the Capetians, Philip of Valois, became king (d.1350). War soon began. Armored knights on horseback were the backbone of medieval armies, but English peasants using the longbow had begun to change the face of war. It was the beginning of the Infantry Revolution, reversing the trend of cavalry dominating the battlefield since the days of Rome. When the French king was captured, a treaty was signed in 1360: France agreed to pay ransom, the English received land in France, and Edward renounced his claim to the throne. Using guerilla tactics, the French regained their lands, but in 1415 England’s Henry V (d.1422) invaded. The French cause was saved by Joan of Arc (d.1431), a young peasant woman, who claimed to have been told by an angel and saints that she should offer her support to the dauphin, the heir to the throne. Her leadership inspired the French, who also began to rely on cannon, and by 1453 France had won.

During Edward III’s reign, the English Parliament gained control over taxes, increasing its power. In France, however, the Estates-General failed to achieve the same influence. Competing aristocratic factions also divided both kingdoms. In Germany, dukedoms and city-states went their own way, independent of the Holy Roman Emperor, itself an elective and largely powerless office. Italy was divided into small kingdoms in the south, the Papal States in central Italy, and several city-states in the north, notably the duchy of Milan and the oligarchic republics of Florence and Venice. Warfare was endemic.

The papacy declined. Confrontation between France’s Philip IV (d.1314) and Pope Boniface VIII led to the removal of the papacy to Avignon on France’s border in 1305. From 1377 there were two competing popes. Some argued that a general council, not the pope, should rule the church, and conciliarism eventually ended the Great Schism. There was a preoccupation with death and salvation. Some turned to good works, others to mysticism and devotional movements. The scholastics’ confidence in reason was attacked: God’s existence could only be “proved” by faith.

Vernacular literature was exemplified in Italy by Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch, in England by Chaucer, and in France by Christine de Pizan. In art, Giotto explored three-dimensional realism. The impact of the plague led to urban public health regulations, to younger marriages, and to a greater division of gender roles under the assumption that women were the weaker gender, based in part on religious doctrine (since Eve gave in to the temptations of the devil). Technological developments included the perfection of the clock and eyeglasses, and paper began to replace parchment (many of these technologies, like the plague, also came from Asia, China in particular). Finally, the development of gunpowder blew the Middle Ages into history.