POPULATION DURING THE RENAISSANCE

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"Demography is perhaps the most important of all the social sciences." This was the opinion of Henri Pirenne, the great Belgian medievalist, quoted by an outstanding French medievalist, Ferdinand Lot. From it we draw only the conclusion that the subject is important. We also add that the subject is relevant: overpopulation today is a terrible menace, but one which the Renaissance largely avoided. Population is indeed one area in which the Middle Ages and Renaissance did better than our modern world. One question obviously is whether the achievement was an accident or a well-planned operation.

There are other questions. The first is about the condition of population in the first half of the fourteenth century before the plague of 1348. Was it under control, adjusted to the environment, or was it, as some think, already approaching overpopulation? Another question concerns the effect of the recurring epidemics of the plague, continuing throughout the Renaissance. Many answers have been made to this question, but it is a complicated chapter less easily answered than most scholars think. The condition was complicated further by the climate, the Little Ice Age, lasting even beyond the Renaissance. From these facts it might be inferred that the population experience of the Renaissance was not entirely pleasant.

In 1300, however, the future seemed promising. Dante was just beginning to write his Divina Commedia and the Jubilee was so successful that Pope Boniface VIII was ready to defy King Philip IV of France. At this time the population of western Europe (that is, west of Slavic and Balkan territory) was about 54 millions. Roughly, France had 19 million, Germany and Scandinavia 11 million, Italy 10 million, Iberia 9 million and the British Isles 5 million. The total population was about that of any one of those five areas today. Only nine cities seem to have had more than 55,000 inhabitants and five of those were in Italy. The two largest cities, Venice and Florence, had about 100,000 persons each. The others were in the range of 55,000 to 80,000. In Italy the larger cities constituted as high as twenty percent of their region's population. This was an urbanization greater than that of the Roman Empire. It is not surprising that the Renaissance began in Italy for urbanization brings specialization and advance in art and literature as well as in technology and politics.
EXPLORATIONS IN RENAISSANCE CULTURE

As modest as population was in 1300, it was approaching the limits of subsistence in that economy. Yet in England population rose slowly in the half century before the plague. This was true of Germany and Scandinavia, and probably also true of northern France. Good evidence remains for Provence where advances and declines seem about even. The northern half of Italy probably declined slightly while the southern half increased. In Iberia population increased in Valencia, but information is inconclusive elsewhere. We see a difference in development between northern and southern Europe which was to be increasingly characteristic of Renaissance Europe.

Estimating total population usually depends upon the number of persons to the house or family. In Italy by 1300 houses were often quite substantial, but even there the average was only four inhabitants. In England in 1377 and earlier the average was about 3.5 persons. In Carolingian France (where housing conditions persisted for centuries) it was 3.6. Tenth century data from Burgundy show a household of about four, while evidence from a tax collection in Paris in 1292 indicates a smaller household. These data thus deny a recent guess that the average household was five and that northern France and the Low Countries were overpopulated before the plague.

The theory of medieval overpopulation rests heavily on Malthus' well-known theory that population inevitably increases faster then subsistence. A more accurate theory assumes that humanity kept a close watch on subsistence and restrained its numbers within the limits of subsistence. How did it do this? A basic principle has been no marriage if there were no means of support. If the mother nursed her own children the birthrate slowed considerably. Abortion, infanticide, especially of females, and enforced chastity directly reduced population. Yet these controls were quite flexible and could be adjusted if more people were needed. After all, European population tripled from about A.D. 1000 to 1348.

The problem of control was not so difficult as might be imagined. Anthropologists have discovered that women carry a record of the number of children they have born in their pubic bones, an average in ancient and medieval times of only a little more than four, a relatively low average. With an average of four children to the family, arriving about every thirty months, the children were generally healthy. Only a fourth died by age eight and another twenty per cent by twenty years of age. By premodern standards that was good. At age 20 men had an expectation of life of about 25 years, but women only 22. More women died between 20 and 40 than between 40 and 60: the reverse of the men’s experience. At age 40 both could expect 14 more years. Between five and ten percent of the total population lived past sixty and a very few, as today, lived on to 100.