“Hundred Years’ War”—that would bring devastation to France and aristocratic factionalism to both countries: a clear sign of political woes.

Yet the date 1300 might put the cart before the horse, because the most dramatic crisis came a half-century later with the 1347 arrival of a plague that would quickly spread throughout Western Europe. Within two years, about one of every three Europeans would die of the diseases wrought by this contagion, a horrifying event in the short term and a dramatic agent of historical change in the long term. From the perspective of the demographic collapse wrought by the Great Plague, 1350 is certainly a better dividing point than 1300. Yet starting at 1350 would implicitly attribute the crises of the Later Middle Ages to an external force (the happenstance arrival of a devastating disease), suggesting that the plague afflicted a medieval Europe in its prime. This was clearly not so, as we can best see by approaching the Great Plague through the troubled decades that preceded it.

Even more than most eras of human history, then, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (see Timeline 12.1) were violent and unsettled. These were also violent and unsettled centuries in Byzantium. The old Byzantine Empire had been restored in 1261, after six decades of “Latin” (that is, Western) rule. But the restored empire was a mere