

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Black Death

By Margaret Gushue
2018

The bubonic plague, commonly referred to as the Black Death, is a devastating disease that is believed to have killed around 50% of Europe's population in the 14th century. In this informational text, Margaret Gushue further discusses the ways in which the plague impacted Europe. As you read, take notes on how the plague changed life in Europe.

- [1] *"There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death." — Agnolo di Tura, Siena 1348*

It was a fateful day in October 1347 when a fleet of ships docked in Sicily, a large island just off the southern coast of Italy. Their arrival would change the course of European history. They carried traders who had arrived from the port city of Caffa in the Crimea. The people who gathered on the docks to receive the ship had no idea at the time that just by being there they were signing their own death warrants.

When the cabin opened, they were shocked to find the ship rampant¹ with disease. There were corpses with swellings on their bodies and black spots on their skin. The remaining survivors were gravely ill with high fevers. They spat blood. They had swollen lumps in their armpits and near their groins. No one had any idea what this disease was, why it had struck, or how to help them.



"Burying Plague Victims of Tournai" by Unknown is in the public domain.

In just two days, most of the survivors on board had died. But by then they had spread the disease to everyone with whom they had come into contact in Sicily. It was an outbreak of bubonic plague that would later be known as the Black Death. The tradeship is the first recorded account in history of its arrival in Europe. It is difficult to know the exact death toll, but historians today estimate that between 1347 and 1351 this plague killed at least 100 million people across Europe and Asia.

The Arrival and Spread of the Black Plague

- [5] The Black Death, also known as "The Great Plague" or simply "The Plague," was caused by a strand of bacteria found in a population of fleas. These fleas lived on the backs of rats in Asia. Even before the Black Death arrived on European soil, there were rumors of a deadly disease that had taken down entire armies in China.

1. **Rampant (adjective):** spreading unchecked

Earlier in the 14th century, trade between distant countries was prohibitively² time-consuming and expensive. But by the 1340s demand for foreign goods had risen, and travel between the East and West was fairly common. While this meant that trade improved, it also meant that disease could be more easily transferred across the two regions, as well. The rats were carried along trade routes from the East. A diseased rat could pass the plague to a flea while the flea was feeding on it, and the flea could then infect another rat, animal, or person.

Fleas were common enough at the time that bites did not startle people, and humans had not yet discovered bacteria, let alone theorized that it could be transported by insects. At the time, people believed that disease spread through poisonous vapors, or miasma,³ coming from the bodies of the dead. Scientists today believe that the disease was both airborne (meaning it passed from person to person who were near one another) and was carried via contact, namely through rats and fleas. Common medicinal practices of the time period, like bloodletting,⁴ would have also contributed to the spread of the disease. For example, high standards of hygiene were not practiced; physicians didn't even wash their hands.

Symptoms and Devastation

The Black Death was an epidemic unlike any before it. Seemingly healthy people would be struck with the illness and die in as little as three days. Those who contracted the disease became very ill and suffered from high fevers. Tumors would grow on the armpits and in the groin areas. This would be followed by vomiting blood, as the lungs became infected. People were unable to sleep because of the pain and were often unable to keep food down.

It infected people with no clear pattern; the Black Death hit the poor and rich, the healthy and unhealthy. Whole households — including dogs, cats, and livestock — would all perish within a matter of months. It quickly became a pandemic.⁵ In just a year, the Black Death had spread from the shores of Sicily northwards to Italy, France, Spain, and England. In London, where living spaces were more cramped (making it easier for the plague to spread), there was an estimated rate of six deaths for every ten people. The disease also spread east, eventually affecting Germany, Scandinavia, and Russia. Before the Black Death, the population in Europe had been exploding. Europe lost roughly 20 million people to the disease during the initial outbreak. Historians estimate about 50 million people died from the Black Death during the 14th century. It took about two hundred years before the population got back to where it was before the Black Death.

Societal Effects

- [10] The wide reach of the Black Death meant it affected all of European society. Before the plague, through the practice of serfdom,⁶ servants were tied to the land that their lord owned and made almost no money. There weren't enough jobs, and many people struggled to find work. Shortly after the disease struck, the tide turned, and suddenly there weren't enough workers. Many countries now had more jobs to fill than people.

2. so high of a cost that it prevents people from using or doing something
3. an unhealthy or unpleasant vapor or smell
4. the surgical removal of a patient's blood to treat an illness
5. an outbreak of a disease throughout an entire country or the world
6. the state of being a serf, an agricultural laborer who was born to the land that they worked and could not leave in the hierarchal feudal system

This shift meant that for the first time people in Western Europe, particularly in England, had greater choice. They were able to move to different lands and, in many cases, find better working conditions because jobs were abundant and servants were scarce. This shift also affected the feudal lords,⁷ as they had to offer better pay and free materials in order to attract workers. In 1349, King Edward III tried to freeze wages in England to pre-plague rates, but employers were so desperate for help they ignored his decree. This shift in power and wages also loosened the strict social order, giving a new measure of power to the workers and peasants. It effectively brought an end to serfdom in a number of European countries.

Not all societal change led to greater equality. The plague was indiscriminate, and its cause was unknown. This, in turn, led to the persecution of a number of minority groups. For example, Jewish communities were less affected by the Black Death than Christian communities. Scientists and historians today believe that this may have been due to stricter rules around food preparation practiced in Judaism, which hindered the spread of germs. However, during the Middle Ages, this lower rate of infection in Jewish communities led to the superstition that Jewish people were the cause of the pandemic. This fueled rampant anti-Semitism.⁸ There were several massacres of Jewish people, and they were generally ostracized⁹ from larger European society.

Religion, especially Catholicism, was central to the lives of many Europeans before the Black Death struck. While the disease spread, some believed it to be a punishment from God. They decided to repent for their sins by wandering from village to village, publicly whipping themselves and others as penance. Many lost faith in the Catholic Church as people continued to die from the plague. Some converted to Protestantism, while others became more interested in secular¹⁰ ideas about the world.

The Black Death's Legacy

Scientists believe that because of the climate in Europe, the Black Death never became endemic¹¹ on the continent. They believe that the disease was eventually wiped out as rats and fleas died off, ironically from the very same plague they were carrying. The disease died out in Europe in 1351. While it continued to re-emerge periodically over the centuries, it never had as far-reaching an effect as it did in the 14th century.

- [15] The next outbreak of comparable size was in China and India in 1855, about five hundred years after the Black Death reached the shores of Italy. Twelve million people in China and India died. Due to the timing of this final outbreak, scientists were able to isolate the bacterium and understand its spread. In October 1897, after developing a vaccine to slow the spread of cholera, scientist Waldemar Haffkine was sent to India. He created a vaccine against the bubonic plague in January of 1898, using himself as the first test subject.

Scientists and historians today still study the Black Death. They continue to develop vaccines, but with our current knowledge of bacteria, it is no longer the threat it once was. Simple health measures and preventative care, such as washing hands and cleaning cuts, slow the spread of illness.

7. a high ranking individual who had authority over others
8. hostility to or prejudice against Jews
9. **Ostracize** (*verb*): to exclude someone from society or a group
10. nonreligious
11. growing or existing in a particular place, usually of a disease

Looking back, some scholars argue that the Black Death pushed Europe into modernity. The plague upended¹² traditional structures like religion and feudalism that were once the cornerstones of medieval life. It redirected the path of European history, propelling it towards the modern age, though at the cost of millions of lives.

"The Black Death" by Margaret Gushue. Copyright © 2018 by CommonLit, Inc. This text is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

12. **Upend** (*verb*): to set or turn (something) on its end or upside down

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Scientists continue to study the plague's spread through Europe in the 14th century because they can't understand how it spread so aggressively.
 - B. Upper-class people lost their influence over lower classes of people as it became clear that even they would not be spared from the plague.
 - C. The plague modernized health and medicine in Europe as people realized that doctors were unintentionally spreading the plague rather than treating it.
 - D. While the plague was devastating to Europe's population, it also reshaped their social order to allow for greater equality.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Common medicinal practices of the time period, like bloodletting, would have also contributed to the spread of the disease. For example, high standards of hygiene were not practiced; physicians didn't even wash their hands." (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "Many lost faith in the Catholic Church as people continued to die from the plague. Some converted to Protestantism, while others became more interested in secular ideas about the world." (Paragraph 13)
 - C. "Scientists and historians today still study the Black Death. They continue to develop vaccines, but with our current knowledge of bacteria, it is no longer the threat it once was." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "The plague upended traditional structures like religion and feudalism that were once the cornerstones of medieval life. It redirected the path of European history, propelling it towards the modern age, though at the cost of millions of lives." (Paragraph 17)

3. How does the author's introduction (Paragraphs 1-4) contribute to the author's explanation of the Black Death?
 - A. It emphasizes how severely the bubonic plague affected people and how quickly it killed them.
 - B. It reveals how the bubonic plague was able to enter Europe without anyone knowing until it was a full pandemic.
 - C. It shows how closely crowded spaces caused the disease to spread more quickly, especially near bodies of water.
 - D. It suggests that Europe could have easily avoided the plague if they had not let the ship in to the port.

4. How did increase in trade affect the spread of the Black Death?
- A. Increased contact with other countries through trade allowed the plague to spread farther.
 - B. Trade with the rest of the world allowed Europe to search for potential cures for the plague.
 - C. Traders who left Europe were spared from the disease that was quickly spreading through Europe.
 - D. Animals infected with the plague hid on tradeships and introduced new variations of the plague around the world.

5. What connection does the author draw between the Black Death and the shift of power in Europe? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.
