

Causes of the Plague

What was known as the Black Plague began in the East, in countries such as India, Tartar, Syria, and Armenia. It included at least four variants and was caused by the bacillus *Yersina pestis*. This bacillus thrives in the stomach of fleas which in turn are typically parasites of black rats. Due to circumstances not yet understood, the bacilli may multiply to such an extent that the flea's digestive tract is blocked and the flea regurgitates numerous bacilli into the bloodstream of the rodent host. The death of the rodent will cause the relocation of the flea, and if its next host is a human, then a contagion will begin.

The most common form of the disease was the bubonic plague, which caused hemorrhages or buboes of varying sizes. This is the least deadly, and is strictly insect borne; it cannot be transmitted from human to human. The pneumonic plague occurs when the bacillus moves into the pulmonary system, and generally occurred only when the disease was contracted in winter. The septicemic and enteric plague attack the blood and digestive systems, respectively, and are 100% fatal. These both are more rare than the other two types, perhaps because the hosts are killed so rapidly that the bacilli are not given much of a chance to thrive and be transmitted.

(Ed: D.S.) Courie, Leonard W. *The Black Death and Peasant's Revolt*. New York: Wayland Publishers, 1972; Strayer, Joseph R., ed. *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. Vol. 2. pp. 257-267.

How the Plague Spread to Italy

In 1334 an epidemic which would eventually kill two-thirds of China's inhabitants struck the northeastern Chinese province of Hopei, claiming up to 90% of the population - some 5,000,000 people. Carried along trade routes, the "Black Death," as it would soon be called, began to work its way west, striking India, Syria, and Mesopotamia.

In 1346, the Plague came to Kaffa, a Genoese cathedral city and a port central to the successful Genoese trade industry located on the Crimean Peninsula of the Black Sea. The Tartar forces of Kipchak khan Janibeg, backed by Venetian forces - competitors of the Genoese - had laid siege to Kaffa in hopes of removing the Genoese from one of the cornerstones of Europe's defense against Eastern attack and Genoa's dominance of east-west trade. Kaffa was helpless, barely able to sustain even the crudest living conditions. Finding its chief means of supplies cut off, Kaffa spent the next year watching itself decline into a hopeless state.

But then, in 1347, to the Italians' delight, their opponents began to die off at an alarming rate - Janibeg's army was overcome by the Plague. Janibeg had no choice but to call off his siege, but not until he performed one last act of warfare against Genoa. Using the catapults designed to throw boulders and fireballs over the walls of fortified cities like Kaffa, Janibeg launched the Plague infested corpses of his dead men into the city. The Italians quickly dumped these bodies back into the sea, but the damage was done. Due to the squalid conditions forced upon Kaffa by the siege, it was ripe for the quick desolation of the Plague.

Hoping to escape the quickly spreading disease, four Genoese ships, thought to be untainted, departed from Kaffa. They sailed home to Italy.

(D. S.) Adapted from Marks, Geoffrey. *The Medieval Plague: The Black Death of the Middle Ages*. New York: Doubleday, 1971. pp. 1-5, 29, 45-49; Deaux, George. *The Black Death 1347*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969. pp. 1, 2, 43-49; and Gottfried, Robert S. *The Black Death*. New York: The Free Press, 1983. p. 35.

Religious Interpretations of the Causes of the Plague

Plague tractates were long on prevention and short on cures. They were used as a strategy to reassure the people that plague did not just happen without cause, and there were countless theories invented to explain the pestilence. (For a more in depth discussion of contents of tractates see Campbell.)

The earliest known tractate is the regimen of the physician James of Agramont written in 1348 to be read to the common people. James pointed out that the plague killed indiscriminately, destroying master and servant alike. Further, he cited Deuteronomy 24, in which God promised prosperity to those who keep his commandments, and plague to those who do not. He noted other Biblical passages which state that plague is also a punishment of the sin of pride.

The Regensburg chronicler Konrad von Megenburg took up the question of whether the sinfulness of humanity caused or was caused by the plague. He concluded that society itself had caused the plague by its sinful behavior. Others had similar sentiments: that the plague was caused by the wickedness of humanity, and that this wickedness was manifested by an assault on the universals that held society together. In addition, plague was a cure for social fragmentation and sin. Boccaccio himself seemed to hold this belief. Boccaccio condemns the people who fled the city in hopes of escaping the plague. "It was as though they imagined that the wrath of God would not unleash this plague against men for their iniquities irrespective of where they happened to be..." (McWilliam translation).

One medieval Christian understanding of the Black Death revolved around the Book of Revelation and its notion of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - pestilence, war, famine and death. Christians used this biblical context to rationalize and accept the horrible disease shaking Europe. Others thought that the Plague was a sign that Christ's return to reign over the earth was imminent. Still others blamed prideful women and fraudulent Jews for bringing on the Plague in Europe.

(B.C., ed: D.S.) Campbell, Anne. *The Black Death and Men of Learning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931; Getz, Faye Marie. "Black Death and the Silver Lining; Meaning, Continuity, and Revolutionary Change in Histories of Medieval Plague," *Journal of the History of Biology* 24.2 pp. 265-289; McWilliam, G. H. *Giovanni Boccaccio The Decameron*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.

Social and Economic Effects of the Plague

The plague had large scale social and economic effects, many of which are recorded in the introduction of the *Decameron*. People abandoned their friends and family, fled cities, and shut themselves off from the world. Funeral rites became perfunctory or stopped altogether, and work ceased being done. Some felt that the wrath of God was descending upon man, and so fought the plague with prayer. Some felt that they should obey the maxim, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die." The society experienced an upheaval to an extent usually only seen in controlled circumstances such as carnival. Faith in religion decreased after the plague, both because of the death of so many of the clergy and because of the failure of prayer to prevent sickness and death.

The economy underwent abrupt and extreme inflation. Since it was so difficult (and dangerous) to procure goods through trade and to produce them, the prices of both goods produced locally and those imported from afar skyrocketed. Because of illness and death workers became exceedingly scarce, so even peasants felt the effects of the new rise in wages. The demand for people to work the land was so high that it threatened the manorial holdings. Serfs were no longer tied to one master; if one left the land, another lord would instantly hire them. The lords had to make changes in order to make the situation more profitable for the peasants and so keep them on their land. In general, wages outpaced prices and the standard of living was subsequently raised.

As a consequence of the beginning of blurring financial distinctions, social distinctions sharpened. The fashions of the nobility became more extravagant in order to emphasize the social standing of the person wearing the clothing. The peasants became slightly more empowered, and revolted when the aristocracy attempted to resist the changes brought about by the plague. In 1358, the peasantry of northern France rioted, and in 1378 disenfranchised guild members revolted. The social and economic structure of Europe was drastically and irretrievably changed.

(Ed: D.S.) Courie, Leonard W. *The Black Death and Peasant's Revolt*. New York: Wayland Publishers, 1972; Strayer, Joseph R., ed. *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. Vol. 2. pp. 257-267.

Petrarch on the Plague

Petrarch endured the Black Death in Parma, and responded to it quite unlike Boccaccio. Petrarch addressed the effects of the plague in highly personal and emotional lamentations. One such lamentation discusses the death of Laura de Noves, whom Petrarch had met at Avignon in his youth. Laura died in Avignon, a victim of the plague that was raging there, and Petrarch learned of her death in a letter he received from a friend in May of 1348. Later he expressed the sadness he felt at her death in some lines he wrote on a manuscript of Virgil:

Laura, illustrious by her virtues, and long celebrated in my songs, first greeted my eyes in the days of my youth, the 6th of April, 1327, at Avignon; and in the same city, at the same hour of the same 6th of April, but in the year 1348, withdrew from life, while I was at Verona, unconscious of my loss.... Her chaste and lovely body was interred on the evening of the same day in the church of the Minorites: her soul, as I believe, returned to heaven, whence it came. To write these lines in bitter memory of this event, and in the place where they will most often meet my eyes, has in it something of a cruel sweetness, but I forget that nothing more ought in this life to please me.

As the plague raged in Parma, the poet wrote to his brother, who lived in a monastery in Monrioux. His brother was the only survivor out of thirty-five people there, and had remained, alone with his dog, to guard and tend the monastery. Petrarch's letter relies greatly on the classics, much as Boccaccio's account does on the influence of Thucydides. The genuine anguish of Petrarch's letter is as apparent as is the horror of Boccaccio's account:

My brother! My brother! My brother! A new beginning to a letter, though used by Marcus Tullius [Cicero] fourteen hundred years ago. Alas! my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother, that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times. How will posterity believe that there has been a time when without the lightnings of heaven or the fires of earth, without wars or other visible slaughter, not this or that part of the earth, but well-nigh the whole globe, has remained without inhabitants. When has any such thing been even heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?... Oh happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these [punishments] and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same...

(M.R., ed: D.S.) Adapted from: George Deaux, *The Black Death 1347*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969. Chapter IV, pp. 92-94.

Effects of the Plague on European Jews

In 1348 there appeared in Europe a devastating plague which is reported to have killed off ultimately twenty-five million people. By the fall of that year the rumor was current that these deaths were due to an international conspiracy of Jewry to poison Christendom. It was reported that the leaders in the Jewish metropolis of Toledo had initiated the plot and that one of the chief conspirators was a Rabbi Peyret who had his headquarters in Chambry, Savoy, whence he dispatched his poisoners to France, Switzerland, and Italy. In Strasbourg, the patrician municipality sought to protect the Jews, and at the end of 1348, when rumors spread that the Jews were poisoning the wells to spread the plague, the council of Strasbourg remained convinced of their innocence and took up their defense. On Feb. 9, 1349, however, Mayor Peter Swarber, and two counselors were compelled by the craftsmen to resign. On February 13, the new council decided to burn the Jews. According to tradition, the decision was enforced on Saturday, February 14, when 2,000 Jews perished. The only ones spared were those who accepted baptism; however, a number of those converts were the victims of a new persecution in the summer of 1349, when the plague actually reached the town and took a heavy toll of lives. On Sept. 12, 1349, Emperor Charles IV officially pardoned the town for the massacre of the Jews and the plunder of their possessions.

Jacob von Konigshofen (1346-1420), a chronicler, wrote the following in "Cremation of the Strasbourg Jews":

"On Saturday . . . they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. [Some say that about a thousand accepted baptism.] Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt...."

Effects of the Black Death (Bubonic Plague) in Europe 1347-1350

Create a chart – sort the following effects into political, social, and economic categories.

- Population decrease
- Inflation
- Peasant revolts (Watt Tyler in England, Jacquerie in France)
- Some people become more religious
- Production decline
- Serfs can bargain for freedom or run away
- 1/3 of the population in Europe dies
- Some people become more superstition
- Flagellants do public penance
- Some people become reckless, living wildly and irresponsibly
- Scapegoating of marginalized groups
- Some people lose faith in the Church
- To maintain control of serfs and peasants and maintain income, feudal lords attempt to reinforce feudal dues and obligations (taxes, control of serfs, etc.)
- Monarchies begin to strengthen
- More witch trials
- Increased anti-Semitism; medieval holocaust in German feudal states

