

Conflict and Upheaval – The Black Death, 1348 - 1350

Overview of key information

Introduction...

All the conditions were right for an epidemic...

- Doctors were powerless against infectious disease.
- People were weakened by war and harvest failures.
- Germs, the fleas which carried them, and the rats which carried the fleas, flourished in the dirty towns.
- Busy trade routes carried the plague from one place to another.

The plague arrived at Melcombe Regis in Dorset in June 1348 and it spread throughout the south of England. In 1349 it reached Wales, Ireland and the north of England. By 1350, it had made it to Scotland. Estimates suggest as much as half the population died. The Black Death affected the way people thought about life in many different ways. Some lived lives perceived to be wild or immoral, others fell into deep despair, whilst many chose to accept their fate.

Historians suggest that the Black Death helped to cause a religious movement in the shape of the Lollards, the end of the feudal system and the Peasants' Revolt.

Contemporary beliefs about the causes of the Black Death...

Medieval European medicine was very different from our modern concept of medicine. There was no knowledge of germs, and only relatively basic tools to diagnose and treat illness. Much of medicine was, at best, based on ancient Roman and Greek ideas of the 'humours'. The ideal was to balance specific fluids known as 'black bile', 'yellow bile', blood and phlegm (the fluids made by your ear, nose and throat). To be in a bad or good humour was evidence of how healthy you were! Other doctors would release "evil spirits" by trepanning (drilling a hole in your head to release them). In this context it is not surprising that the causes listed below emerged.

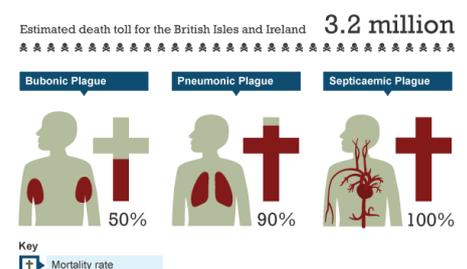
Medieval doctors were not certain what caused the plague, but believed it could be the result of:

- the movements of the planets
- a punishment from God – the 'wrath of God'
- bad smells and corrupt air - miasmas
- enemies who had poisoned the wells
- staring at a victim
- wearing pointed shoes
- strangers arriving in villages

The spread of the Black Death...

The bubonic plague was a painful disease, with black buboes or swellings, in the groin and armpits, which lasted up to a week. There was some chance of surviving if the buboes burst. If the buboes burst of their own accord it was a sign that the victim might recover.

An estimated 30% to 60% of the population of Europe died from the plague. This is often referred to as the 'mortality rate'. There were different types of the disease with different mortality rates:



- **Bubonic plague** - victims of bubonic plague itself had a 50% chance of death.

- **Pneumonic plague** - this attacked the lungs. Victims died quickly, in one or two days. The mortality rate in this case was 90%.
- **Septicaemic plague** - this infected the blood. Again victims died quickly and the mortality rate was 100%.

How the plague spread...

1. The plague seems to have started in China in the 1330s.
2. In 1347, armies attacking the town of Caffa in the Crimea, catapulted dead bodies into the town. Italian merchants took the plague with them to Sicily in October 1347.
3. In June 1348 Black Death arrived at Melcombe Regis (in Dorset). By the end of the year it had spread throughout the south of England.
4. During 1349, the plague spread into Wales, Ireland and the north of England.
5. The Scots – thinking that God was punishing the English – invaded the north of England, where their army caught the plague. In 1350, therefore, the plague spread through Scotland.
6. The first plague died out in 1350.

Contemporary beliefs about cures for the Black Death...

In the 1347 - 1350 outbreak, doctors were completely unable to prevent or cure the plague. For those who believed in the Greek humours there were a range of cures available. 'Blood-letting' – deliberately bleeding a vein – was a way of reducing 'hot' blood, whilst blowing your nose or clearing your throat was a way of getting rid of too much 'cold' phlegm. Mustard, mint sauce, apple sauce and horseradish were used to balance wet, dry, hot and cold in your diet!

A source from 1380 presents a cynical view of their work:

"Doctors need three qualifications: to be able to lie and not get caught; to pretend to be honest; and to cause death without guilt." **Jean Froissart's Chronicles**

Some of the cures they tried included:

- Rubbing onions, herbs or a chopped up snake (if available) on the boils or cutting up a pigeon and rubbing it over an infected body.
- Drinking vinegar, eating crushed minerals, arsenic, mercury or even ten-year-old treacle!
- Sitting close to a fire or in a sewer to drive out the fever, or fumigating the house with herbs to purify the air.
- People who believed God was punishing you for your sin, 'flagellants', went on processions whipping themselves.
- In the 1361 - 1364 outbreak, doctors learned how to help the patient recover by bursting the buboes.
- Doctors often tested urine for colour and health. Some even tasted it to test.



Consequences of the Black Death...

Deaths

Estimates differ, but most historians believe that the Black Death killed half the population of Europe. In some places, e.g. the village of West Thockley in County Durham, it killed everybody. The death-rate was especially bad in monasteries, where the monks stayed together and cared for each other. Some historians suggest that the wealthier classes were less affected due to their wealth enabling them to flee from outbreaks.

Effects

The precise effects are difficult to assess given the huge loss of life and subsequent inconsistent records. In some places there was even no-one left to bury the dead let alone record the effects. However, historians have suggested the Black Death had significant consequences:

- **Psychological:** the Black Death had a huge influence on the way people thought about life. Some lived wild, immoral lives, others fell into deep despair, whilst many chose to accept their fate. Many people were angry and bitter, and blamed the Church – some historians think this helped the growth of the new 'Lollard' religion in the 15th century. It could also be argued that the Black Death had brought down rich and poor alike. Having faced and survived the plague, people at the bottom of society were more prepared to question their position in society.
- **Social:** poor people began to hate their poverty and their 'betters' – some historians think this helped to destroy the feudal system.
- **Economic:** there was a great shortage of workers, and when Parliament passed laws to stop wages rising, poor people became very angry – some historians think this helped to cause the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

How have historians viewed the Black Death – things to consider for interpretation questions...

Different historians have different views on events from the past, depending on their own beliefs (political and religious), on the perspective they are writing from, the range of evidence they have used for research, and their intended audience. All these things can impact on an historian's opinion, and explains why people have different views on the same topic / event.

- Some historians view the Black Death as a significant disaster and have described it as a catastrophe which destroyed the Church and caused the Reformation. One historian claimed that it was one of the three greatest catastrophes in the history of the world. Other historians suggested that the Black Death destroyed the feudal system and caused the Peasants' Revolt.
- Other historians questioned this. Some historians have suggested that the Black Death made people wealthier, because it reduced the number of people sharing the wealth.
- Marxist historians claimed that the social changes of the 14th century were caused by general climate and economic factors, and that the Black Death speeded the changes up, but did not cause them. They would see the Black Death as less important than other factors in causing change.

Key words glossary...

1. **buboes**

An inflamed swelling of a lymph node, especially in the area of the armpit or groin, that is characteristic of certain infections, such as bubonic plague.

2. **catastrophe**

An event that causes great damage and suffering.

3. **chronicle**

An account of events arranged in the order they took place.

4. **epidemic**

A major outbreak of a disease that spreads rapidly to a lot of people.

5. **feudal system**

The feudal system was a way of organising society into different groups based on their roles. It had the king at the top with all of the control, and the peasants at the bottom doing all of the work.

6. **Lollard**

A follower of John Wycliff. Wycliff believed that churchmen should lead simple lives and that the Bible should be translated into English.

7. **Marxist**

A believer of the political theories of Karl Marx, in which the class struggle has driven historical change and that there should one day be a society without a class system, i.e. capitalism will be replaced with socialism.

8. **mortality**

The death rate as a result of a particular cause.

9. **parliament**

The law-making body of a country.

10. **reformation**

Punishment that should reform the criminal (change them for the better).