

The Great Dying

Afro Eurasia experiences the Bubonic Plague with disastrous results.

In the mid-fourteenth century, the plague pandemic [disease widespread over an entire country or world] first known as the Great Dying and later as the Black Death arrived from Central Asia to afflict Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Carried by infected fleas that infested black rats, clothing, bedding, or human body hair, the plague appeared first in Europe and the Middle East in ports. Then it progressed quickly along rivers and roads into towns and cities, progressing more slowly into rural areas inland. Bubonic plague, the most common form of the disease, killed people in three to five days. It began with high fever climbing to 105 degrees, then it caused convulsions, vomiting, and agonizingly painful swellings. Those sores, or buboes, which gave their name to the disease, appeared in the lymph glands and could be the size of an egg or apple. Between two-thirds and four-fifths of those bitten by the fleas and infected by the disease died.

But a victim didn't even have to be bitten by a flea to spread the plague. The bubonic plague also took on a pneumonic form. The pneumonic form of the plague affected the lungs and could be transmitted directly from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or even breathing. The first signs of this form of the plague were fever, headache and general weakness. Then the patient would develop shortness of breath and a cough that often caused the victim to spit up blood. This form was always fatal and could kill within a matter of hours.

All in all, during the initial half-century or so of recurring 343 outbreaks, about one-third to one-half of the population died in the areas that the plague reached. In crowded cities, the death toll was higher and dying was faster. For instance, in the Italian town of Pistoia, it is estimated that about two-thirds of the population died during the plague's first occurrence in 1348. Three more waves of the plague afflicted the city before 1400. In the last of these, half the remaining population died. In the next half-century or so, the plague returned six more times.

Life in Afro Eurasia created perfect conditions for a Pandemic disease

Many features of fourteenth-century life encouraged the spread of the plague. Thatched roofs (made of rat-attracting straw), wattle-and-daub walls [popular building material in Europe at the time - walls were made not of plaster but of a combination of wet soil, animal dung and straw], household trash, and straw on floors and in bedding provided nesting places and food for infected black rats and fleas. When sick rats died, the fleas that infested them looked for other hosts. Human bodies and woolen clothes, both unwashed, were comfortable habitats for fleas. Long-distance trade along the Silk Road, religious pilgrimages, the march of armies, and the custom of nobles and their households of moving from manor to manor were all ways that infected rats, fleas, and people carried the plague from place to place. Medieval towns and villages were crowded, and within houses whole families sometimes lived packed together in a small room, which they often shared with domestic animals.

Although the plague killed both rich and poor, mortality among the latter was higher. The rich lived in houses more likely to have stone floors and walls with tile roofs, locked-away food supplies, and less contact with garbage, making their homes less attractive and accessible to rats.

It is noteworthy that King Alfonso IX of Castile was the only crowned head of Europe who died of the plague. He contracted it when he refused to leave his troops after the plague broke out both among his own and the enemy soldiers. Mortality was also higher than average among physicians and priests, because they attended the sick and dying. One city's careful records show that there were nine municipal physicians and eighteen barber-surgeons in the population of about 12,000. But only one physician and two barber-surgeons survived.

Effects of the Bubonic Plague

Historians' judgments about the effects of the Black Death have varied. In the short term, the huge die-off brought a serious labor shortage. One early result of this was a mini-boom in the slave trade in some areas such as northern Italy. Entire villages were abandoned and untilled fields were converted to pasture for sheep.

Effects on religion, education, and individualism

Over the long term, the experience of the plague contributed to the establishment of government-controlled public health boards, the use of quarantine, and more university-oriented training for medical professionals. Because of the difficulty of replacing victims, such as priests and officials, who knew Latin, the Black Death also led to the Bible and education being taught in local languages, not Latin. For a long time in Europe, priests were the only people allowed to read and interpret the Bible. But after so many priests died, the Christian church had no choice but to open up their religion to a different group of people who weren't as educated as before. This led to a lot of new views and voices – within the church collective learning was bound to take place.

Some have seen popular loss of confidence in Church and political authorities as contributing to greater individualism and to a rising interest in personal religious beliefs. That is, the plague was part of the background to both the Renaissance and the Reformation. [You will learn more about these next year] The Renaissance or “rebirth” in Europe is the time period that (roughly) followed the Bubonic Plague's devastation. During this time in history Europeans were able to explore the world and had the freedom to make many advancements in art, science, government and culture that had never before been made in Europe. The Reformation was a Christian religious movement that focused on a priest named Martin Luther who believed that the Catholic Church was corrupt and that faith alone couldn't save a sinner (we addressed this quickly in the religious schism assignments).

There was also a significant increase in charitable giving, especially to hospitals, new chapels, and pilgrimage centers. In the arts, themes connected with death were popular. While the church in Europe gained a lot of new leadership and ideas, and lost some power in some respects, it also gained a lot of money as well. Often people would give the church all of their money if they were infected with the hope that God would save them. Many people would also leave their land to the church in their wills. The church gained a huge amount of money and land from the destructive death of the plague outbreaks in Europe.

Effects on trade, travel and collective learning

As the Black Death made its destructive path across Europe, Russia, and parts of the Middle East, people began to realize the dangers of traveling or leading a nomadic lifestyle. With each new destination came the possibility of infection. Travel slowly waned during the period immediately following the bubonic outbreaks, and as it ran its course would be travelers and migrants opted instead to stay within the safety of their own homes and communities. These outbreaks (and the lack of travel and trade because of them) could have led to increased stagnation and a lack of increase of collective learning in Afro Eurasia during this period.

Effects on economics, social classes and urban life

Another widespread effect was increased tension between upper and lower classes. The rich who survived had more wealth concentrated in their hands, having inherited from all who had died. The working classes, however, also held a stronger hand because the scarcity of labor encouraged them to demand higher pay and greater freedoms. Manpower was suddenly of much greater value than it had been before (because of all the people that died). For the first time in centuries, peasants weren't available in large numbers and the wealthy nobility had difficulty hiring the workforce necessary to prepare their fields and harvest their crops. So, peasants in Europe found themselves quite unexpectedly and unprecedentedly in demand, a shift which shook European society to its core.

Kings and queens now had to bargain with their laborers over working conditions, and the under-classes were able to demand better compensation for their services. Wages rose, in some places doubling over the course of just one year. At the same time, prices were falling because there were fewer people to buy goods. Resentments and conflicts of interest between the classes led to uprisings in a number of countries among peasants in the countryside and workers in the cities. The Peasant Rebellion in England in 1381 is a well-known example.

Once the major impact of the disease was no longer felt, the towns of Europe repopulated faster than smaller communities in the countryside. This new, urbanized Europe paved the way for a society and economy based on different principles, laying the groundwork for modern life, an era when cities, industry and trade have come to predominate over farming and living in the country.

The Black Death and the recurring bubonic plagues had equally far-reaching effects in north Africa, the Middle East, and Inner Eurasia, and probably in China. Epidemic disease and the disruptions that went along with the massive die-off of people may have been a factor in the collapse of Mongol rule in China, the weakening of a huge empire in Egypt and what is now modern day Syria (The Mamluk Empire), a general downswing of production and trade all across Afro Eurasia, and a widespread shift of populations from rural areas to towns and cities.

Finally, one other positive result of the bubonic plague was the development of medicine as a science in Europe. Prior to the bubonic plague outbreaks Islamic doctors had for centuries been advocating sensible measures like general cleanliness and the value of studying anatomy, but doctors and healers in Europe prior to 1347 were still using outdated and incorrect ideas about the body and how disease spread. But when Plague wiped out nearly all the doctors in Europe, just as it had the clergy-physicians, like priests, attend to the dying and because of this were exposed at a higher rate to the more dangerous pneumonic form of Plague-it led to a massive change in both personnel and ideas. Ironically, then, modern Western medicine owes much to the bubonic plague, one of its most horrifying failures. Many of the ideas of the European Enlightenment sprung from the medical concepts developed during the plague outbreaks. Doctors found the benefit of questioning established medical practices (because they were wrong) and this questioning was applied to all fields of science and learning in the 1400s and beyond.

