

# Causes and impacts of the black death



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## The Great Mortality

It was a huge plague affecting the pattern of society from the 14th to the 18th century Europe. Whether they were farmers, businessmen, nobles, bishops, they were died in the plague possibility. The plagues caused countless death and injury, almost overthrew European religious beliefs, and made a huge change in the social hierarchy. It was called “ the Great Mortality” by the writer, and later it was named the Black Death which has been best known. In the current society, most historical researchers have shown that the Black Death is an important landmark in shaping the modern world because it affected society whole, rather than affecting a single group. Undoubtedly, it was a huge tragedy. Together, it was also synonymous with “ aristocratic class integration with the civilian class”, “ population impact”, and “ down the influence of the church power”. Now, medical scientists believe that the pathogen of the Black Death which had caused panic throughout the Middle Ages is the plague bacillus. However, in the Middle Ages, different groups had different understandings and misunderstandings for the Black Death. Doctors were also scarce resources. Therefore, the Black Death could not be good controlled in Europe ultimately, until the 18th century, the symptoms of the plague began to disappear. In this paper, I will give a detailed introduction to the Black Death, the state of the European society in the Middle Ages, and the attitudes of different groups towards the Black Death, to prove the Black Death was an event that shaped the modern world we live in today.

To understand the social conditions of Europe in the Middle Ages is the first step in researching the effects of the Black Death. Dr. Armstrong mentioned

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in her video “ Europe on the Brink of the Black Death: Episode 1”, the three keywords that mark the medieval European society are “ Christian, agricultural and feudal, and the church has the most property” (Armstrong 2016). In Christian Europe, the church was the owner of the greatest rights. Church with politics, education, and commercial trade were all inextricably linked, and it could be said that it involved all aspects of society. The first thing after people woke up daily was to pray and tell to God their good wishes for the future. They hope their God could bring them good luck and blessed their lives. They believed that God is omnipotent, and the church was the representative of God. They regarded God as faith and hold the church to the top of their rights. The life of civilians was praying except for working. The number of people who study was not many. They did not think that knowledge has any use. And because the force of the church had into many schools, students had almost been influenced by religion. The medieval European hierarchy was clear. From top to bottom to arrange, the king is the first, then nobles, knights, merchants, and peasants. Farmers were the biggest labor force. Handicrafts and agriculture in medieval Europe were extremely developed, and economic growth was directly linked to agricultural production growth. Agriculture was the lifeblood of the European economy. Merchants had accumulated a lot of wealth because of trade. Nobles had most land, they hired farmers to work for them and thus gained benefits. However, the arrival of the Black Death had revolutionized the social structure of medieval Europe whole. Whether it is the status of the church or the hierarchy of society, they had all changed because of this plague.

The Black Death was not originally called the Black Death but was called the Great Plague. The Black Death was the name given to it by scholars after many centuries. It was used to describe the horror of the plague, not because the infected person had black marks and then named it Black Death. Black represented the despair of death, no one knew how it should be treated, and no one knew how to stop the plague. More and more dead people, every day there were many people died on the streets. Europe was like a hell, filled with dead souls. Many people are worried that they would die in the next moment. It was at this time that the church issued a statement. They believed that the plague was God's punishment for human sin, called on people to pray to God every day and beg God to stop this catastrophe. " Oh God, it is acting by Your command. Lift this from us. It happens where You wish; keep the plague from us. Who will defend us against the horror other than You the Almighty" (Ibn al-Wardi 1348). Ibn al-Wardi was an Arab writer who died of the plague in 1349. He once wrote an article hoping that God can waive his punishment for humanity and hope that God can save his followers. In the eyes of believers, God is an omnipotent, he will protect all his followers, and as long as the believers pray in earnest, they will be able to obtain God's forgiveness. And because the profound influence of religion on their thoughts, they believed that asking for help from God was indeed a useful act. They did not give up their faith although they were on the disaster, and they did not receive any response. They prayed day after day, from hope to despair, and their gods still did not save them from the plague.

Faith had no way to save their lives, what about medicine? When people realized that God would not make their situation better, they turned their attention to the doctor. However, doctors are a scarce resource in medieval Europe. Among them, the “bird’s mouth doctor” was very important in the treatment of the Black Death. They wear masks with beaks and they had not much medical experience. They were the hope of people who wanted to be saved. Some medical schools analyzed the source of the Black Death and tried to find a way to stop the plague. Also in 1348, the Paris Medical Faculty published a research report that they believed that dead fish in the ocean were the source of the Black Death. Fish death corroded water, and the water was illuminated and evaporated by the sun, to form toxic water vapor. These water vapors were transmitted through the air and were brought to the rest of the world. Therefore, they put forward many suggestions for prevention, which was the most important one, “as soon as this rain shall announce itself by thunder or hail, every one of you should protect himself from the air” (Paris Medical Faculty 1348). The Paris Medical Faculty believed that as long as it was far away from toxic rain, the situation of the plague would be improved. Therefore, people must be careful not to be affected by rain, and prepared wood and wormwood to burn in densely populated areas so that the rain would be as soon as dry and avoided touching toxins. Not only that, but the Paris Medical Faculty also proposed eating habits that needed to be maintained during the rain. Avoiding to eat poultry and waterfowl. The broth needed to be seasoned to make the body warm. People needed to eat spicy herbs instead of vegetables. It was best to only drink wine. This was a very demanding dietary condition. In addition, the Medical Faculty believed that bathing was also harmful to the human

body. It is enough to simply clean it. In order not to suffer from the Black Death, people tried to avoid rain and steam, and the nobles only drank wine to maintain the water they needed. The doctor proposed a variety of strange treatments, for example, “ Apply a mixture of tree resin, roots of white lilies and human excrements...Drink the pus of lanced buboes...Place a live hen close to the swellings to Draw Out the pestilence then drink a glass of your own urine twice a day” (Alice M. Phillips 2017). In the end, there was still no good results. The plague lasted for four centuries.

The modern world has many different conclusions about the study of the Black Death. The most mainstream saying is the plague, and some people think that the bacteria are from the rattlesnake. Davis, David E. mentioned in his research paper, “ Ecologically, Rattus would have had great difficulty surviving in the rural medieval habitats, which supported the Black Death” (Davis 467). The possibility of the rattlesnake living at that time was not high. He was more inclined to spread the plague by mouse. Although someone was pointed out there was not enough number of mice that could cause plague in Europe, this statement was rejected after the research. There was a possibility that the sailors who went out to sea were infected with the Black Death and they were isolated, but the rats carrying the plague bacteria on the ship ran into Europe, which triggered the plague. In the long process of finding the source of the Black Death, no scientists have found a very correct answer. The bacteria that caused the formation of the Black Death had disappeared into history and became a hidden secret. This unexplained cause has attracted more biologists to explore, and they have done experiment one after another, tried their best to look for the pathogens of

the plague. In the modern world where human science is gradually breaking through, more evidence may be found by biologists to make existing conclusions more convincing in the near future, or their conclusions will be completely overturned and new research will begin.

Anti-Semitism broke out during the Black Death. In the shadow of the plague, the neighbors of the street were not in contact with each other. In many cities, people considered the plague was caused by Jewish poisoned in the water. Then, the Jews were subjected to particularly serious inhuman treatment. A large number of Jews were either forced to move or cruelly killed. The chroniclers of the time described a massacre which was in Strasbourg, " they were burnt in many cities, and wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned" (Jacob von Königshofen 1349). By 1351, many Jewish groups were completely disappeared. Jews fled to Eastern Europe, Russia, and Poland, where they were protected. More Jews moved their homes to the farther Middle East slowly.

The Black Death had a huge follow-up effect on the religion, institutions, and economy of European society.

The status of the church gradually declined in the plague, and religious reform began at this time. Since the number of priests who died in the plague was not in a minority, the rights of the pope were disintegrated, and people began to rethink whether the God they blindly pursued really existed and whether God would really hear their prayers. This idea had shaken many religious believers and the church was no longer in a high position. The new

idea of humanism was put forward, and the theme of it was to pursue and explore the existence of one's own life. This kind of thinking had the great impetus to the society, which made the medieval European society began to develop as modern European society.

“ The general welfare and prosperity of the peasantry also progressed as a reduced population reduced the competition for land and resources”(Mark Cartwright 2019). The epidemic of the plague had reduced the population of Europe, with the fastest decline in the population being serfs. This caused the lack of labor in the Middle Ages in Europe, the lack of cultivation of large areas land, the serious decline in agricultural productivity, the cessation of economic growth and even negative growth, and the European economy almost collapsed. The serfs that had long been dominated by the nobility had never been well treated before the Black Death. They had to pay the aristocratic rent to borrow land to cultivate, and then to obtain little benefits from them. The nobility was the biggest beneficiary. After the death of a large number of peasants, the serf system quickly collapsed. The nobles did not want to ruin their own land, they only could hire serfs to work for them at high prices. The economic level of the lower classes of society had been raised, and the land income of the nobility had decreased. In order to pay for the labor, they chose to marry the merchant class. The integration of the two classes broke the class system of the society, and the status of the merchant class was improved. However, the nobles were still troubled by the high wages they had to pay. They tried to reduce the expenses through the law, but this action let the peasants broke out. The peasants fought for their rights and no longer obeyed the nobility. It was a pity that the final result of



the peasant uprising is a failure. However, the feudal system had also changed. Farmers wanted to reduce their labor density, and the farming machine had begun to be used. Most of the farmland was converted into pasture, and wool was their most profitable commodity. The relationship between the aristocrats and the peasants slowly disappeared after the 15th century. Changing in the economic system of Europe had affected the advancement of technology. Expensive labor made capitalists look for more advanced ways to make a profit. The path of capitalism had opened up, and the development of trade had re-driven the European economy. Wool became an export product. The status of the merchant had once again been enhanced and even gained more rights.

The Black Death had accelerated long-term changes in Europe. The Black Death directly shook the absolute authority of the church and promoted the emergence of humanism and religious reform. The church lost some power and laid the foundation for Protestant reform. European medicine was more open to scientific observations and evidence. The hospital became a place of treatment, not just where people died. Cities deciders were increasingly aware of the importance of public health measures such as garbage collection and food inspection. The consequences of anti-Semitism were still the fuse of the gunpowder barrel in the Middle East. The shortage of workers had spurred new labor-saving inventions, and higher incomes had stimulated demand for foreign imports, which had led to the exploration of long-distance trade routes. The feudal society had undergone changes. The lack of population had led to the collapse of the serf system. Capitalism was growing. Compared with many landowners who have been seriously affected

by the wealth on the land, merchants and financiers in the city can recover from the disaster quickly, enter the country with their strong wealth, each department held important positions, and in quite a few times they became the main decision makers of the government. In terms of social status, the status of merchants and financiers had gradually become equal than that of nobles. By the middle of the 15th century, serfs had disappeared in most Western Europe. The rebirth of the urban economy had provided a material carrier for the development of capitalism and had become a pioneer in Europe's transition from the Middle Ages to modern society. The occurrence of the Black Death changed the old social structure and greatly promoted the great development of capitalism. From technology to the organization, from material foundation to various trends of thought, these thoughts had profoundly affected the various ideologies of contemporary society.

Perhaps the Black Death was accidental. According to historical laws, even if there was no Black Death, the Middle Ages would pass, but the Black Death playing an important role in a certain period of time. If there was no Black Death that swept Europe in the past, when will humanity say goodbye to the Middle Ages?

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