

The light of the black death

[History](#), [Middle Ages](#)



The Light of the Black Death The Black Death, a pestilence of despair and darkness, ravaged Western Europe from 1348-1350. The Black Death is also known as the " Black Plague" or " Bubonic Plague", as the main symptoms of the plague were the blackening of the buboes, or, bubbles on the skin. However, despite all the dark thoughts, there was a revolution within the plague that gave Medieval Europe hope for a better future. This was due to the fact that the Black Death affected the society of the time in numerous ways. It changed things religiously, economically, socially, and scientifically. The feudal system suffered, the middle class grew, as did the economy. Likewise the plague also had a powerful effect on the worlds of science and medicine. After extensive research and work, medical advancements emerged from the devastation and brought around change in Europe such as post mortems, the discovery of bacteria and sanitation procedures which were previously unheard of in society. Society also experienced many changes in routines and thoughts, due to the concerns of the citizens and their actions. Doctors of the time were forced to research the plague and through this research many new discoveries were made. Although at this time they found no treatment or cure for the plague they made several significant advancements and developed a better understanding of diseases and the human immune system. Medicine also advanced when science began to take a role in the ideals of treatment, which proved to be worthwhile. " The plague also served as a catalyst for the Renaissance which was to occur soon after. It is very seldom that one event changes history so drastically" (Perry 189). This is why the plague was not solely a tragedy of the Medieval Ages, it was also a cornerstone for medical and societal growth

and development in Europe. Tragedy however, is a component of the Black Plague, aka the Black Death, there is no denying that. " It may have reduced world population from an estimated 450 million to between 350 and 375 million. For a developing nation that is a major deficit that cannot be afforded. " (Sherman 265). The plague affected the young, the old, the strong and the weak, and left no one safe from its grasp. The Plague spread through most of Western Europe in a matter of months hitting even the rich along with the poor. " Children were left in the streets to fend for themselves after their parents died [From the Plague] because no one had the time nor energy to take in and aid another except themselves" (Herilhy 528).

Population decreases were not the only effect of the Black Plague, but they were certainly the most drastic and had the most impact on the time period, and the developing world. The dead were a main concern for the living of the time period. Most infected civilians lasted anywhere from a short twenty-four hours, to the two day mark. " There were so many dead that Londoners had to dig mass graves (large trenches for many bodies)" (Britannica 450). The cities reeked of death and rot from the decomposing corpses left on doorsteps to be picked up and buried by the unlucky few designated with the task. " So many were dead that new jobs for the living were created to pick up the dead" (Thompson 22). The Plague era was a mentally traumatizing time for the citizens and it showed, " many were reported as " possessed" as time progressed on, paintings especially depict the abuse of said people" (Perry 345-46) Whole villages faced starvation and food shortages, not even the surrounding towns had enough food to give out of pity. Crops died due to lack of attention and bad conditions, along with most agriculture. The lords

who lost their man power to the disease lost most of their farming and suffered economically. The loss of workers severely affected all parties in the Western European culture. Inflation in living costs and made everyone's life harder, along with the plague ravaging on, by 1349, most business had suffered to death, and the feudal system had no peasants to support the hierarchy. The Black Death of 1348 was undeniably a tragedy that affected the daily lives of Western Europe civilians to such an extent, that it changed the ritual ways of living. Throughout all this however, medicine was one area of focus that truly expanded through research. Before the revelation after the plague, the main principle of medieval medicine was the theory of humours. The theory stated that every individual was comprised of four humours that needed to be kept in constant balance for a healthy life style. "The balance of humours in humans could be achieved by diet, medicines, and by blood-letting, using leeches" (Jones 125). After the plague had made its rounds, many European doctors realized that "the plague could be spread by contact and not through failed religion" (Gordon 301). This change was massive as medicine prior to this date had been wholly intertwined with religion to the point where one could not study to be a doctor until they had been fully accepted with a degree in theology. However as the plague wore on, many religious remedies did not give results, so the majority started to believe that God had left them to perish. Throughout the research in the field, science began to take more of an appeal and many scientists began to realize that bacteria were a factor in many of the previously religiously attached illnesses. New methods began to be sought out, and as a result post mortems were introduced to gain knowledge about the causes of death

and what could be done to prevent them. " Many questioned how the religiously faithful were dying and sought out answers, which were answered by looking at the dead and questioning why they died" (Gordon 304). Little by little, the use of herbs and clever concoctions as medicine was being questioned, and new answers were being sought. In the aftermath of the plague, science oriented medicine began to move to the front of research, with more autopsies and post mortems performed and more accurate studies and descriptions of the human anatomy. Anatomy became a new focus in the medicinal world, and systems were being discovered within the body. Sanitation was also a major revelation of this era due to the extensive research done with post mortems and the general interest in science. More sanitary rules came in to play in this era, and continued to be a practice until more up to date information came through. The revelations brought on by the plague brought up a whole new area of focus and revolutionized modern medicine. Along with the post mortems and new inquisition in to science, hospitals no longer served merely to separate the sick from the healthy. Once the plague had taken its toll, hospitals actually began treating the sick in an effort to cure their illnesses. Though medical treatment remained a far cry from what we know today, " the concept of placing people suffering from the same afflictions together in one section of the hospital also owes its genesis to this time period" (Brooker 408). Now, there were different wards for different illnesses, instead of everyone thrown together and hoping for the best. Through all of the research done in the name of the plague, it is one of the most positively influential disasters in 1348, making it a cornerstone for medicinal advancement. With all the questioning taking

place, answers were given that contradicted the daily thinking of the citizens and society. These realizations resulted in massive shifts in societal actions and perspectives. " The Black Plague also had drastic effects on the economy during the Late Middle Ages. With the drastic population decrease, the production of food and goods also decreased. This allowed peasant farmers to demand higher wages and increase the prices of their products. Likewise, skilled workers could charge more money, since they no longer has as much competition assuming there was work" (Perry 317). This allowed the economy to grow and flourish after such desolate times and led to the fall of the Feudal System. Peasants who worked on the fields in their towns could not leave and work on other fields in separate towns without their lord's permission. Which such demand for workers many lords began to allow the mobility of the peasants between lands which gave more freedom to those who were previously restricted. The final major change that occurred due to the plague was the creation and growth of the middle class. " With less workers to complete tasks, those who did accept jobs made enough money to close the gap from the poor and the rich of the era" (Burningham 210). Due to the closure of the gap, many of the peasants of the era had considerably more favorable living conditions which increased the standard of living. Throughout all these changes the Medieval society reformed and made societal changes that came in to play for many years to come and ultimately gave Europe a new outlook on life. Through this new outlook a stone was turned and the survivors of the plague watched as Europe grew and developed. Although undeniably horrific, the Black Death's death toll and shocking message helped form the world that we know today. Had such

devastation not occurred we may not be as technologically advanced, or even as societally advanced as we are today. While the world would certainly have changed over time, the plague was a wakeup call to the way of life that was being lived and showed the people that change was needed. The advancements that came due to the plague show that it was not only a tragedy, but it proved to sustain some of the greatest societal and medicinal revelations and growth in Europe. " History repeatedly tells us that even in the bleakest of times — or perhaps, especially in the bleakest of times — there are things to be learned and gained; and the greatest sufferings often teach more than the greatest triumphs" (Brooker 478).