

The black death in europe essay example

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



The Black Death was one of the most devastating episodes of plague to ever hit Europe; in the late 1340s, the Black Death raged through towns and cities. 1 How the plague began, the vectors of the plague, how it spread, who it affected, as well as the social, political, and economic ramifications of the plague are all important topics to explore in understanding the overall impact of The Black Death during that time to western society.

Many researchers believe the Black Death began in somewhere in China in the late 1330s, where its natural hosts, “ various species of rodent such as marmots and voles,” lived in great quantity. 2 People are, more or less, accidental victims of the plague, which far prefers the rodents to make its home and to pass itself along; the evidence for this comes from researchers who traced the genetic lineage of the plague, finding that it originated in China, yet not in the densely populated areas. 3

There are several ways a human can contract the plague. The most renowned is transmission by a flea that has bitten a rat carrying the disease. *Yersinia pestis* is the name of the bacteria that causes the plague in its three forms: the most common form is the Bubonic plague, which is signified by “ buboes” or very swollen lymph nodes of the neck, groin, and armpits. 4 Next is the Septicemic plague; in this variety, the disease is active in the bloodstream, and can come from both fleas or contact with plague-ridden body matter. 5 Finally, the Pneumonic plague is the most contagious form, occurring when the disease attacks the lungs and can be spread through coughing. Bubonic plague is 50% fatal, the other two forms almost 100% fatal to victims. 6 In 1451, a man named Francois Villon wrote about the horror of the final stages of the Black Death: “ Death makes him shudder and

grow pale,/ Makes his nose twist, his veins stretch,/ His neck swell, his flesh soften/ His joints and tendons expand and strain.” 7 His words vividly capture the horrific physical effects the plague had on people.

The plague travelled quickly to new locations via rat fleas on ships. 8 Historian Steven Kreis describes an event in October of 1347 when a dozen Genoese trading ships entered the harbor of Messina in Sicily. Whatever other cargo the ships held, Kreis states that the most significant were the “ dead or dying sailors [with] strange black swellings about the size of an egg located in their groins and armpits . . . The victims coughed and sweat heavily. [Their] sweat, blood, breath, urine, and excrement . . . smelled foul.” 9 Another example of plague transmission by ship was when the Mongols attacked the Italians’ last trading station in the region at Khaffa in the Crimea; in autumn of 1346, the plague broke out among the Mongols, and in the spring the surviving Italians escaped on their ships, carrying the Black Death with them. 10

In addition to travel by sea, the plague could also travel by land. The population of Europe had increased greatly from 1050-1300, and trade networks expanded to accommodate the necessity of providing many people with an assortment of goods. These new trade routes were also increased human and vermin interaction, allowing “ contagious diseases [to reach] even the most remote and isolated hamlets.” 11

The plague affected women and children with a higher incidence of mortality than men. Men in general were affected less by the plague, their age and greater economic status lowering their mortality rates. 12 According to a contemporary Parisian physician, “ one who was poorly nourished by

unsubstantial food fell victim to the merest breath of the disease,” explaining why the nobility were less susceptible than the poorer people to the plague.

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Early researchers believed the Black Death killed 20-30 percent of Europe’s people, but more recent studies have shown that these numbers should at least be doubled. 14 Researchers now estimate that at least 25 million people died during the sweep of the Black Death. 15 People did what they could to try to stop the plague. “ Exaggerated public fear that is out of proportion to the facts of transmission and blame of already socially marginalized communities” also lead to the punishment of some groups. 16 Jews were widely blamed for the plague crisis, and there were continent-wide pogroms in which they were “ rounded up in large numbers, locked into buildings, and incinerated.” 17 Some physicians recommended inhaling the odors of one’s outhouse as a remedy; another remedy that was somewhat more useful than odor inhalation was that the sick would be boarded up in their homes, “ showing a basic understanding of the principle of containment,” and cities introduced statues for better hygiene that may have had some effect on limiting the plague. 18

Many people during the years of the Black Death had their own ideas about what caused this plague. Historian Steven Kreis writes, “ The earthquake of 1348 was blamed for corrupting the air with foul odors, thus precipitating the plague. The alignment of the planets was specified as yet another cause: Saturn, Jupiter and Mars aligned in the 40th degree of Aquarius on March 20, 1345. 19 However, what many people at the time believed about the Black Death is that it was a punishment by God for their sinful natures. 20 The

Catholic Church endorsed the belief that the Black Death was a divine punishment, and in September of 1348, the Pope made a papal edict in which he referred to “ this pestilence with which God is affecting the Christian people.”²¹ Again, the influence of the Church explains more about the scapegoating of the Jews. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the Church created laws to isolate the European Jews, barring them from many forms of trade and requiring them to wear a yellow badge in the shape of a coin; soon after, Muslims and prostitutes endured the same fate.²² In revenge, in 1349 in Mainz, Germany, Jews attacked and killed 200 Christians; however, in return Christians killed 12, 000 Jews; the persecution of the Jews did not subside until the Black Death itself did in 1351.²³

The Flagellant Movement was another group that tried to use faith to combat the Black Death. The Flagellants confessed all their sins from age seven, then flagellated themselves for 33. 5 days; they also made vows to never shave, bathe, sleep in a bed, change clothes, or speak to the opposite sex.²⁴ Arrival of the Flagellants to a town or village was a major event that brought about “ spiritual regeneration for people who needed it,” but eventually it came into conflict with the Church, who claimed that it alone could purge the people of sin.²⁵

Overall, the decimation of the Black Death during this period had many consequences for the people, many bad and some good. As far as the bad effects, entire families were exterminated, towns and cities left decimated, economics were disrupted, persecution grew for minority groups, scholarly work was slowed, and governments were in disorder. However, for the survivors, the Black Death could also prove to be a boon. As the population

declined, the value of a worker rose; there was an increased demand for labor which allowed wages and the standard of living to rise. 26 As one researcher wrote, " The Black Death Appears to have given the economy of Europe the jolt that brought it kicking, if not screaming, into the Early Modern Era. The Renaissance occurred soon afterwards." 27

Yersinia pestis, the bacillus responsible for the Black Death plague, is still around today. It continues to exist worldwide in rodents populations like rats, squirrels, rabbits, and skunks. Today, there is a cure available if it is administered in time. One researcher writes, " Every few years I read in the newspapers how a hunter has contracted the disease . . . [but] there are some isolated places in the Rockies, and once in awhile the hunter doesn't make it." 28 A concern for scientists is that *Yersinia pestis* could mutate into a less treatable form and cause a current day pandemic. Considering the toll the Black Death took on medieval Europe, this is a terrifying thought indeed.

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