

# The black death

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In 1348 the Black Death struck England and other parts of Europe. It had been brought from Asia by ships that had rats on them. These rats carried fleas which, in turn, carried the plague. During this time it is estimated that over 40% of England population died as a result of the Black Death. This left many towns and villages deserted. The Black Death consisted of 2 different types of plague- the bubonic plague (spread by fleas) and the pneumonic plague (spread by coughing germs onto each other). The Black Death then reoccurred in 1361, 1369, 1374 and finally 1390.

Unfortunately the people in 1348 were unaware of germs and fleas so began to create their own causes and cures for the Black Death ranging from blaming God and the Devil to finding common sense reasons. Some people believed that God was trying to punish people for their sins or punish children for dishonoring their mother and father. In a letter from the Prior of the abbey of Christchurch, Canterbury, to the Bishop of London written on the 28th of September 1348 it says 'And thus, indeed, the realm of England, because of the growing pride and corruption of its subjects, and their numberless sins ... s to be oppressed by the pestilences'.

This is saying that God is punishing the whole of England for their pride and many sins. God's punishment on young children (The Black Death in 1361 had a severe impact on children) is written in a passage by an unknown churchman in the early 1360s says 'it is vengeance of this sin of dishonoring and despising fathers and mothers that God is slaying children by pestilence. ' Some people called the Flagellants believed that God was to blame for the pestilence and, because of this, carried out processions in the middle of public places.

Robert Avesbury described a group that had recently come from Flanders to London. He says that they went in a barefoot procession twice a day in the sight of people, only wearing a linen cloth from loins to ankles. They wore a hood painted with a red cross at the front and back. They carried a whip with three 'thongs' on them. These had a knot in with something sharp (e. g. needle) stuck through the middle. When they walked they would whip themselves. Three times in each procession they would lay down onto the floor and stretch their arms into a cross shape.

Other people began to follow Galen/Hippocrates theory of the four humours. In one of John of Burgundy's early books about the Black Death, written in 1365, he says 'As Galen says in his book on fevers, the body does not become sick unless it already contains evil humours. ' By this it means that only if a person's humours are evil can they become ill. John of Burgundy also wrote advice on avoiding the plague according to the four humours and treatment of 'opposites'.

He said that people should avoid eating and drinking too much and avoid taking baths as it open the pores, which he said were 'doorways through which poisonous air can enter the body. ' He then goes on to advise to light fires in rooms if the weather is cold and if there is wind and fog a person should inhale perfumes every morning before leaving home. But if there was hot weather he says that a person should eat cold things and drink more than you eat.

Hot things such as pepper, garlic, onions and other foods that cause extra heat weren't to be eaten. The use of fennel, spinach and cucumber was good

when the epidemic occurred in the hot months as well. Some people believed that astrology was to blame. One of the most famous doctors in the 1300s, Guy de Chauliac, wrote about the effect he thought that astrology had, 'The general cause was the close position of the three great planets, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. This had taken place in 1345 on 24 of March in the 14th degree of Aquarius.

Such a coming together of planets is always a sign of wonderful, terrible or violent things to come. ' In this passage Guy de Chauliac is saying that the unusual formation of major planets were a warning for the happening of big events whether good or bad. Even though people believed that the movement of the Sun and planets caused the Black Death there are no known cures or precautions to take against this 'cause'. Another idea for the cause of the Black Death was invisible fumes or poisons in the air that infected people with the plague.

An account of the causes of the pestilence by an unknown German author that was written about 1350-80 says 'I say that it is the vapour and corrupted air which has been vented ... in the earthquake on St Paul's day 1347 ... which has infected the air above the earth and killed people in various parts of the earth. ' By this passage the writer was claiming that poisonous gas, leaking from the earth's core, was causing the death of so many people worldwide. Some of the population used their common- sense to help them understand the 'true' cause of the Black Death.

A fifteenth-century Swedish bishop, who based his study on the work by John Jacobus (a royal doctor and Chancellor of Montpellier University, which was a

renowned school of medicine) that was written in the 1360s. He talks about how the Black Death could have been caused, 'a privy next to a chamber or any other particular thing which corrupts the air in substance and quality ... sometimes it comes from dead carrion or the corruption of standing waters in ditches. ' By this he was saying that the lack of hygienic conditions were causing the Black Death.

By the thought of unclean/ dead things being left to rot or smell, the Black Death could have been, if the hygiene problems were seen to, stopped. In fact measures were taken to clean up London by the public and the government. However, we know that the English people didn't keep this up as the plague reoccurred in England later on in history. Even though the reasons mentioned so far were nowhere near the real cause for the Black Death it is easy to see where most of them were found however, there were more obscure ones. The German people made up one example of these around 1348.

A German friar wrote 'Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture ... men say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs. ' Even though the friar wrote that the Jews confessed under torture it is not wise to believe just this, as under torture many people would confess something that they never did just so that they were left alone.

To stop this poisoning, Germans burnt the Jews. We know this because of a woodcutting that shows exactly this. All of these explanations were mostly incorrect yet people still believed them and even did drastic things that didn't work to cure and prevent the Black Death. This could have been because some people were afraid of accepting the truth that they couldn't do anything to stop or cure the terrible disease. This means that in some ways the belief in a cure and cause was the only way they could have hope in a chance of not dying.