

Black plague: the epidemic of the fourteenth century



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Abstract

The paper examines the outbreak of Bubonic plague, popularly known as Black Death that plagued Europe during the fourteenth century. The paper begins with an introduction, and then the causes of the plague are tackled. The symptoms of the paper are also discussed. The paper concentrates on the consequences of the plague as they have a lot of historical significance. The conclusion relates the plague and subsequent upheaval in Europe.

Black Death: The Epidemic of European Fourteenth Century

Introduction

The Black Death that occurred between 1348 and 1350 in Europe was one of the most destructive pandemics in history of the medieval world. Medical microbiologists believe that the pandemic was actually an outbreak of Bubonic Plague brought by *Yersinia Pestis*, a dangerous bacterium. Historians working together with medical archivists believe that the Black Death originated in China, and traveled through the Silk Road to Crimea in 1346. Oriental rat fleas from black rats that were regularly spotted on merchant ships are believed to have brought the disease to Europe and the Mediterranean (Monecke, Monecke and Monecke 2009, 583-87).

The Black Death killed about 40% of Europe's population. This had the effect of reducing the population of the world from 450 million to around 375 million in 1400. The Black Death caused political, religious, social and economic upheavals in the medieval world. These upheavals shaped the course of European History. Historians post that it took around 150 years for

Europe to recover from the devastating effects of the Black Death

(Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

Background to the Epidemic

Historians post that a confluence of factors contributed to the plague in Europe. The plague hit Europe at a time when the Continent was on the throes of economic and social tribulations. Geographical changes had caused economic and migratory upheavals all over the continent. The warm period ended in Europe towards the end of the 13 century. It brought the little ice age with severe winters that drastically reduced harvests, particularly wheat harvests. Technological inventions like the three field system and the heavy plough did not yield much in clearing fallow land for cultivation in Northern Europe as in Southern Europe. This brought about food shortages and rapidly increasing food prices (Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

The food shortages led to massive malnutrition in Europe. Malnutrition increases the susceptibility of people to infections. Heavy rains begun to fall in 1314 ushering in long periods of cold and wet winters. This had the effect of weakening the harvests of the north which was followed by the seven year drought. The monarchs of Europe, who controlled government instituted measures that prohibited the export of food. The northern lands like England in Scotland were unable to import food because of those restrictions. To make matters worse, they were engaged in war. This reduced their capability in handling the Black Death when it struck (Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

Causes of Black Death

Historians have identified several possible causes of the plague. Most argue that the plague was caused by the bubonic infection. The underlying argument is that the disease was caused by a pathogen that is responsible for an epidemic in China in 1865. The bacterium that caused the disease is identified as *Yersinia pestis*. The mechanism of transmission of this bacterium was through fleas. These fleas had their midguts obstructed by replications of *Yersinia pestis* after feeding on the infected host (Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

Another cause of the disease that is put forward by Historians is the Malthusian crisis. This states that the deterioration of social, living conditions and the failure of agriculture played a significant part in the spread of the disease. This is because there had been a population explosion in Europe that was coupled with dire living conditions in Europe (Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

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Symptoms

The modern accounts of Black Death are often imprecise. Historians have noted that some symptoms that are hard to miss putting in mind that they were observed later in China in 1865. One of the symptoms that was common were the appearance of buboes in the neck, armpits and groin. These buboes produced pus, and also bled when opened. Acute fever together with vomiting was another symptom of the Black Death. The lungs were also affected leading to breathing and respiratory problems. Death

followed after two to seven days since the day of infection. The victims were covered with rashes and freckle like spots. Nausea and severe headaches were another symptom of the disease. Victims of the disease suffered from a general feeling of malaise, and they were also predisposed to Pneumonia (Moneckea, Moneckeb and Moneckec 2009, 583-87).

Consequences of Black Death

Black Death had devastating effects in Europe and some parts of the Middle East where it was experienced. One of effects was to depopulate the world, especially Europe and also Africa and the Middle East (Aberth 2001, 78-79).

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Depopulation

Depopulation was one of the effects of Black Death. Information about the number of the people who died varies from one historical source to another. It is approximated that at least 25 million people died in Europe. Other people died in Africa and the Middle East. It is useful to note that, for purposes of this paper, the plague was mainly a European affair. The disease begun in Asia, specifically China and it is imperative that the death toll from Asia be reported. The initial disease outbreak in China claimed 5 million people, an estimated 90% of the population in the province of Hubei. A latter outbreak in the Chinese /Mongol Empire claimed 25 million people.

It is estimated that between 40- 60% of the population of Europe perished in this plague. This was between 1348 and 1350. Over 30% of villages were depopulated. The depopulation was worst on the smaller communities that were forced to flee to towns and cities. The culture of cities was hit hard by

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the plague. This was especially so in Poland and Lithuania. The large cities of Europe were hardest hit (Aberth 2001, 78-79). This is because the population density made disease transmission extremely easy. Cities in medieval Europe were also exceptionally filthy, full of lice and rats. Malnutrition and poor hygiene were the hallmarks of city life in medieval Europe. The fact that new communities were fleeing to the cities increased the transmission of the plague among communities. It increased the longevity of Black Death (Aberth 2001, 78-79).

Social Economic effects

On the social economic platform, Black Death had devastating results. This was exacerbated by the fact that the continent was on the brink of major upheavals caused by wars and famines. The governments of most European nations did not have effective responses to the crisis portended by Black Death (Aberth 2001, 78-79). This was because scholars could not explain how the disease spread, or what caused the disease. Medieval Europe was governed through monarchs. They had instituted measures that outlawed exports of foodstuffs, set price controls and damned black market speculations (Aberth 2001, 78-79). Also, outlawed was large scale fishing. These restrictions sent Europe on a downward spiral. This is because, countries like England and Scotland that had been engaged in fighting, were unable to buy grain from France. The seas were impassable due to the scourge of pirates. The plague hit Europe when the continent was in the beginning stages of an economic recession (Aberth 2001, 78-79).

One of the facets of the economy that was hugely affected by the plague is the Agrarian economy. This is because the agrarian economy was hugely
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disrupted by the plague. After the plague, rural peasants began to demand higher wages for services rendered. In England, wages rose from 12% to 28% during the plague period. From 1340 to 1360 the wages rose again by around twenty percent. Another economic impact of the plague is that the supply of gold and silver increased. This increase was on a per capita basis (Hatcher 1977, 122). This, in turn, had the effect of inflation in prices. This inflation substantially reduced the purchasing power of most people in Europe. This made the life of the peasant and wage laborer more difficult than it had been before the plague (Hatcher 1977, 122).

Another economic effect that is related to the agrarian state of affairs caused by the plague is that most lords lost the services of their peasants. This is because most peasants tended to gravitate towards the places that offered them better prospects. This in turn led to the neglect of around 60% of the land in England. The reduction of the labour pool by the plague increased the bargaining power of the peasants and wage earners (Hatcher 1977, 122). It made the peasants, who had been servile in pre-plague period to ask for tasks that were less onerous. This led lords to be left with vacant plots. This way they lost over 60% of their weeks labour. 20% of all winter and summer work in addition to most winnowing services were lost to the lord. The failure of the lord to make concessions made him lose his peasants and labour. Surviving tenants after the plague abandoned their holdings. This was extremely devastating to the lords (Benedictow 2004, 105).

The contours of the settlement were profoundly altered by the plague. The catastrophic depopulation of Europe contributed to the abandonment of land that was less profitable to land that was profitable. There was a contraction
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of the existing settlements and wholesale dissolution of villages. It is estimated that more than 1300 villages in England vanished in the wake of Black Death (Benedictow 2004, 105).

The commercial economy was also affected by the plague. It brought about a shortage of labour in the cities. The advantage of the city is that it could attract new workers from the countryside. This increased the conflict between the manorial landlords and the city businessmen. This led to the resurgence of the slave trade in Africa and the Mediterranean. This slave trade was widely practiced in Italy (Benedictow 2004, 105). The female slaves entered domestic services while the male slaves toiled in the countryside. The plague had the effect of dislocating the demand for goods. The structure of demand of goods was also transformed. The standard of living was increased for most people, and they experienced an economic windfall. This was through the increase of disposable income. With more disposable income, the demand for goods increased (Benedictow 2004, 105).

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One of the industries that were greatly affected by Black Death is the textile industry. This was a precocious industry even before the plague. After the plague, it was hugely disrupted especially when England came into the market with low quality cloth after the legislation of the Magna pestilencia. This made the textile industry grow rapidly in England (Benedictow 2004, 105).

Other effects of Black Death

One of the effects of Black Death is that it led to vicious attacks on lepers, Jews and other outsiders who were accused of poisoning the water and air in Europe. Those with any skin disease faced persecution. The persecutions of Jews begun in France and spread to Switzerland and concentrate in Germany. The massacres of Jews begun in Bern. It is posted by historians that the persecutions were done as an insult to the kings and churches that protected the Jews. This persecution of the Jews led them to move eastwards. They moved to Poland and Russia (Benedictow 2004, 105).

Religion was drastically changed by Black Death. The traditional moorings of religion were greatly weakened. Historians believe that the plague caused mass neurosis in Europe. People begun to believe that God was raining down his wrath on them. It is said that it led to the black mass, a form of devil worship. Cynicism developed towards the religious leaders of the day. The Black Death had also a profound effect on the arts, the art of the time turned morbid (Benedictow 2004, 105).

Conclusion

The Black Death had profound effects on the continent of Europe. Many things that latter happened in subsequent centuries had their genesis in the Black Death. These range from religious reformations to industrial revolutions. It can be argued that the reformation of the church has its roots in the Black Death. This is because it was during this time that people begun to question their religious leaders. The roots of the holocaust can be traced to the Black Death. The roots of the agrarian and industrial revolutions are in the Black Death (Hatcher 1977, 122).

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