

THE BLACK DEATH

Timeline of the Fourteenth Century

1300-1309

- Eyeglasses come into use.
- In 1309, the first of seven popes who would be rivals of the Roman popes, establishes a papal residence at Avignon, France.

1310-1319

- The first mechanical clocks appear in Europe.
- Pope John XXII issues prohibitions against the practice of alchemy.
- The first Western European book on human anatomy, based on dissection, appears.
- A grain crisis in Europe starts in 1315 and results in widespread famine. Crop failure due to cold, wet weather forced people to eat their seed grain.

1320-1329

- The Aztecs founded the city of Tenochitlan on the spot where they saw an eagle sitting on a cactus with a snake in its beak; here the Spanish conquerors will establish Mexico City 200 years later.
- The Pope forbids the use of counterpoint in church music.
- The explorer Marco Polo dies in Venice, January 9, 1324.

1330-1339

- The University of Paris decrees in 1336 that no student can graduate without attending lectures on "some mathematical books."
- The Hundred Years' War between France and England begins in 1337.

1340-49

- The first blast furnace for iron smelting is developed in Belgium.
- In 1346 or 1347, Italian ships bring rats carrying fleas infected with the Black Plague to Europe.
- Geoffrey Chaucer, author of the *Canterbury Tales*, is born in London.
- By 1347, small cannons that shoot arrows, using gunpowder, have been designed. This marks the first appearance of guns in Europe.

1350-1359

- By 1351, an estimated 25 million Europeans have died from the Black Death.
 - The French king is kept a prisoner in England for a few years.
 - In 1358, a peasant uprising in France kills 20,000 people.
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1360-69

- The French reconquer many of the territories that had been captured by the English.

1370-1379

- The first quarantine station is set up in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. Persons suspected of exposure to the plague must stay at the quarantine station for forty days before being allowed to enter the country.
- Robin Hood appears in English literature.
- The steel crossbow is introduced as a weapon of war.

1380-1389

- Geoffrey Chaucer begins to write the *Canterbury Tales*.
- Rockets are used for the first time in Europe at the battle of Chioggia, between Venice and Genoa.
- Cast iron objects become generally available in Europe.

1390-1399

- Italian mapmaker Paolo Toscanelli makes a map incorrectly showing Asia to be only 3000 miles west of Europe. A century later, this map inspired Columbus to make his first voyage of discovery.
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The Black Death, 1348

As you read The
Black Death
annotate the story.

Coming out of the East, the Black Death reached the shores of Italy in the spring of 1348 unleashing a rampage of death across Europe unprecedented in recorded history. By the time the epidemic played itself out three years later, anywhere between 25% and 50% of Europe's population had fallen victim to the pestilence.

The plague presented itself in three interrelated forms. The bubonic variant (the most common) derives its name from the swellings or buboes that appeared on a victim's neck, armpits or groin. These tumors could range in size from that of an egg to that of an apple. Although some survived the painful ordeal, the manifestation of these lesions usually signaled the victim had a life expectancy of up to a week. Infected fleas that attached themselves to rats and then to humans spread this bubonic type of the plague. A second variation - pneumatic plague - attacked the respiratory system and was spread by merely breathing the exhaled air of a victim. It was much more virulent than its bubonic cousin - life expectancy was measured in one or two days. Finally, the septicemic version of the disease attacked the blood system.

Having no defense and no understanding of the cause of the pestilence, the men, women and children caught in its onslaught were bewildered, panicked, and finally devastated.

The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague as it ravaged the city of Florence in 1348. The experience inspired him to write *The Decameron*, a story of seven men and three women who escape the disease by fleeing to a villa outside the city. In his introduction to the fictional portion of his book, Boccaccio gives a graphic description of the effects of the epidemic on his city.

The Signs of Impending Death

"The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumours. In a short space of time these tumours spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumour had been and still remained.

No doctor's advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease, An enormous number of ignorant men and women set up as doctors in addition to those who were trained. Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the

appearance of the tumours described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching. "

Varying Reactions to Disaster

"Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety.

Some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity would preserve them from the epidemic. They formed small communities, living entirely separate from everybody else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately, avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. Others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting at what happened. They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking immoderately, or went into other people's houses, doing only those things which pleased them. This they could easily do because everyone felt doomed and had abandoned his property, so that most houses became common property and any stranger who went in made use of them as if he had owned them. And with all this bestial behaviour, they avoided the sick as much as possible.

In this suffering and misery of our city, the authority of human and divine laws almost disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and the executors of the laws were all dead or sick or shut up with their families, so that no duties were carried out. Every man was therefore able to do as he pleased.

Many others adopted a course of life midway between the two just described. They did not restrict their victuals so much as the former, nor allow themselves to be drunken and dissolute like the latter, but satisfied their appetites moderately. They did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands, in the belief that it was an excellent thing to comfort the brain with such odours; for the whole air was infected with the smell of dead bodies, of sick persons and medicines.

Others again held a still more cruel opinion, which they thought would keep them safe. They said that the only medicine against the plague-stricken was to go right away from them. Men and women, convinced of this and caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad or at

least to the country round Florence, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them but strike only those who remained within the walls of the city, or as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come."

The Breakdown of Social Order

"One citizen avoided another, hardly any neighbour troubled about others, relatives never or hardly ever visited each other. Moreover, such terror was struck into the hearts of men and women by this calamity, that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children, as if they had not been theirs.

Thus, a multitude of sick men and women were left without any care, except from the charity of friends (but these were few), or the greed, of servants, though not many of these could be had even for high wages. Moreover, most of them were coarse-minded men and women, who did little more than bring the sick what they asked for or watch over them when they were dying. And very often these servants lost their lives and their earnings. Since the sick were thus abandoned by neighbours, relatives and friends, while servants were scarce, a habit sprang up which had never been heard of before. Beautiful and noble women, when they fell sick, did not scruple to take a young or old man-servant, whoever he might be, and with no sort of shame, expose every part of their bodies to these men as if they had been women, for they were compelled by the necessity of their sickness to do so. This, perhaps, was a cause of looser morals in those women who survived."

Mass Burials

"The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbours smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner. Most of them were treated in the same manner by the survivors, who were more concerned to get rid of their rotting bodies than moved by charity towards the dead. With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the door; where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen. They then were laid on biers or, as these were often lacking, on tables.

Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full."

References

Boccaccio, Giovanni, *The Decameron* vol. I (translated by Richard Aldington illustrated by Jean de Bosschere) (1930); Gottfried, Robert, *The Black Death* (1983).

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Guiding Questions

Answer the questions below after annotating this document

- Describe the different ways the Plague presented itself.
 - What are the symptoms of the Black Death?
 - How did people protect themselves from the disease? Do you think this was effective?
 - How were people with the plague treated? How would you have treated people with the plague?
 - How were people buried as a result of the plague?
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