

RESEARCH PAPER  
“The Black Death”

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The most disastrous epidemic to ever affect Europe, let alone the world, the Black Plague is known to every elementary grade level and is drilled into every American's head in every high school history class they will ever take. According to Ole Benedictow, it is commonly referred to as the "Black Death", which is most likely the mistranslation of the Latin word "atra" meaning both "terrible" and "black." It swept through Europe between 1346 and 1353 C.E. (or A.D.) killing millions in its wake. Even though it occurred 650 years ago, it still affects people today.

Joan Acocella notes in the article "The End of the World" which appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine that the plague's unrivaled conquest of life caused the death of 50 million people out of Europe's total population of 80 million (62.5%), which is the equivalent of two billion people when measured against Europe's population today. Most major cities lost more than half of their total population. According to the historian Boccaccio, "[M]ore than half of the inhabitants of the northern Italian city of Florence perished, and morality figures for other European cities and regions were no less horrific" (Nardo 48). As the Black Death continued, even rural villages were afflicted by its fatal blow. All that stood in its path were put to the test of survival. The world was in chaos.

Yet, when people hear about the plague, they often learn its path of destruction and how it affected the people. But, many often forget to entertain the thought of its origin and importance in history. Believed to have originated on the central Asian steppe, there was what is called a plague reservoir. *Xenopsylla cheopsis*, the flea, carried the plague on black rats. Unknown natural disasters swept the plague-carrying rodents from the central Asian steppe into human contact (*The Black Death* 2).

Meanwhile, sometime around the mid-1340s a group of Mongols besieged an outskirt European trading station called Kaffa. Suddenly, several of the Mongols fell ill and died. Their leader immediately ordered the carcasses thrown into the city, hoping the dead would infect the invaders. It worked, and the Italians fled by ship to escape the victorious wrath of the Mongols. A couple of black rats joined them for the journey, unnoticed. Unlike other rat species, which prefer a good distance between themselves and humans, black rats like human closeness. Another unfortunate occurrence is the fact that water travel was not as advanced, so ships docked every 3 to 4 days. Due to the constant contact with humans, the "Yersinia pestis" bacteria (black plague) jumped from the black rat flea to the "Pulex irritans", also known as the human flea (McMullin 16). The effect was enhanced because "Medieval people were covered with fleas - they thought bathing dangerous to their health" (Biel 222). The plague continued to enter the continent through several ports, thus hitting Europe from several sides at once.

For this reason a continental disaster occurred. With immense trading routes connecting nearly all of Europe, the plague quickly and easily became a widespread epidemic. Europe was at its prime toward the end of what is now called the "High Middle Ages." With the ability to "travel up to 600 km in a fortnight by ship" (Ziegler 41), the Bubonic Plague quickly marred the trade route from Constantinople through Mediterranean Europe to Italy. The city of Marseilles served as the "spread center" or the place where the epidemic was most focused. Next it continued to Spain, then inland to Paris, through Normandy, Germany, then to England (mainly London), and on to Ireland. Another plague front swept from Norway into Denmark and Sweden; then both fronts continued eastward.

Furthermore, the plague traveled to the Egyptian city of Alexandria from Constantinople, henceforth infecting northern Africa and parts of the Middle East. There appeared to be no escape, but most people had a better chance of surviving in the countryside than the city, where it took up to eight weeks for the people to realize the plague was upon them (Knox 19). According to "The

Middle Ages: The Black Death”, with so many dead, each morning a cart rode through town calling, “Bring down your dead!”, so people brought their dead. They put them in the cart where they were delivered to the graveyard. The people dug “plague pits” and layered the dead, separating each body with only a thin layer of dirt. The graveyards were in such disorder that the historian Don Nardo stated, “[I]n many places in Sienna great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of the dead... [A]nd there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies” (Knox 26). Eventually, the graveyards became full, and the Pope consecrated the Rhone River so bodies could be dumped in the river. Because priests were also victims, laypeople were allowed to administer last rites.

Soon Medieval experts advised against hot meals, bathing, and sex to avoid catching the plague (McMullin 47). Many theories exist concerning the plague’s origin. The Paris College of Physicians said that the plague was caused by evil vapors and was sent by “heavenly disturbances” (Nardo 99). Christian believers amassed to kill vast numbers of Jews because they believed that Jews were the cause of the Plague.

When none of the Medieval medicines worked, the Pope and other officials allowed the bodies to be dissected, yet no cure was found. Flagellants wandered from town to town and beat themselves and prayed to help convince God to end the plague. Social status was in an uproar. As Boccaccio stated, “Brother abandoned brother... fathers and mothers refused to see and tend to their children” (*Black 3*).

Consequently, trade was profoundly affected. Trade routes closed down and were not used again for years. Famine beleaguered the people along with the Black Plague, and the fields were left to rot. As a result, people ate cats and dogs, and some even turned to cannibalism. Artisans lost their jobs. Morale was low because there was no relief. The Renaissance poet Petrarch characterized the era perfectly when he said, “O happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe and will look upon our testimony as a fable” (Ziegler 33). In addition, nothing flourished in this time period, including inventions, artwork, and crafts. The population was bogged down by the daily fight for survival and had no time or energy for creativity.

The historical aspects of the Plague are interesting. However, one must delve further to understand the full effect of the Plague on modern society. The most obvious effect is that one out of every three people in Europe died from the Plague (Ziegler 22). This resulted in a much smaller population, and some historians believe this natural population control has been a great benefit to reducing overcrowding, famine, and potential wars (Nardo 22). The Black Death occurred in the time period historians refer to as the Dark Ages. This title, used for obvious reasons, symbolizes the lack of enlightenment and advancement in technology and all cultural areas that can be found in any time period before or after the Dark Ages.

Once the Plague ran its course, people were able to reclaim their inherent curiosity and need to create. The arts flourished once again, and, even more importantly, greater strides were made in the medical field because people wanted to ensure that something similar to the Plague could never devastate a culture to such an extent again. Because people had been so downtrodden and disheartened for seven long years, when they did begin to create again, they did so with an unusual fervor. Some critics maintain that “the strides made in the first twenty years after the Plague would not have been of such magnitude if the Plague had not been so horrific” (Biel 225). As ironic as it may seem, the Bubonic Plague may have been in humanity’s best interest.

## Works Cited

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