The Black Death:

Tragedy of Destruction,

Triumph of Recovery

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Historical Paper

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From the fall of Rome to the 14th century, life in Europe was dominated by the feudal economic system. Most of the European population lived on farming estates owned by lords. Peasants worked for the lord, farming the land in exchange for food and shelter. This system clearly defined social classes, with each knowing its place and job. No one challenged this system because those in power desired to maintain it and those under its rule were powerless to stop it. Feudalism remained in Europe until a natural phenomenon challenged its nearly one thousand year history.

By the mid-1300s, the Black Death had swept through Europe, tragically affecting both its physical and mental state. Fear of the disease led to the inhumane treatment of those infected, as well as the Jewish people who were accused of spreading it. The Black Death’s rapid and widespread impact decreased the population, ultimately collapsing the economy. Still, the tragic outcomes of the plague inspired European peasants to challenge the feudal system, paving the way for numerous social and intellectual triumphs such as medical advancements and the creation of the middle class.

**Origins of the Plague**

While it is almost impossible to know the exact bacterium that caused the Black Death, researchers and historians widely agree that the culprit is Yersinia Pestis. This bacterium is commonly found in fleas residing in small mammals, the most common one being Tarbagon, a rodent native to Central Asia where Yersinia Pestis was present. Many natural disasters, like the

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Great Hunger of 1315,³ or the eruption of Mt. Rinjani in Malaysia which caused “a year without a summer” in 1258,⁴ led to famines and the death of most tarbagon. With limited mammal hosts available, the infected fleas jumped onto humans, beginning the Black Death.⁵

The Spread of the Black Death

The plague first broke out in 1338 in the Asian village of Issyk Kul.⁶ When merchants stopped in Issyk Kul, they left with the infected fleas.⁷ The plague spread like wildfire all the way to Mongolian General Khan Janibeg and his army as they were sieging the Black Sea port of Kaffa. With his men being mowed down by this vicious disease, Janibeg decided to catapult infected bodies to his foes in hopes of spreading the plague to them. As survivors fled the city by ship, they unknowingly carried flea-bearing rats along with them.⁶

Everywhere the ships went, they left disease and doom in their wake. The disease hit Constantinople in the spring of 1347, and by October, it had spread to Sicily. At the new year, it had reached the Alps Mountain Range. In mid-1348, the plague had completely covered France, half of Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, as well as southern England. As physician Gui de Chauliac recalled:

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And I call the mortality great because it overtook the whole world, or nearly all of it. But it began in the East, and like shooting arrows and it passed through us on its way west. And it was so great, that it hardly left a quarter of the human race.8

Throughout the next two years, the Black Death completed its coverage over all of Europe. 9

The Disease

Yersinia Pestis mutated over the course of the plague, leaving three very distinct strains, each contributing to the fear and mindset of Europe in different ways. The first and most common strain was the bubonic plague which was spread through fleas, killing roughly half of those infected.10 This plague left its victims with purple buboes, or sores, over their bodies; they were dead within a week.

The second strain was the pneumonic plague. It worked so quickly that the telltale buboes of the bubonic plague didn’t have time to form. This strain was airborne and extremely contagious; it could be transmitted simply by breathing or talking to another person.11 The contagious nature of the pneumonic plague helped fuel the extreme fear of the sickness by making it seem as though one would be infected by simply seeing or being in the presence of another.

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8 de Chauliac, Gui. "Grande Chirugie (Great Surgery)." In The Black Death the Great Mortality of 1348-1350 a Brief History with Documents. N.p., 1363.


The third and final form was the septicemic plague. This was the deadliest and quickest acting of all of the strains. It was so swift that there were no visible symptoms, making it the rarest form.\(^{12}\) Despite its rarity, the septicemic plague fueled the fear of Europe immensely. As Francesco Petrarch wrote;

_He passes that night with his last sorrows in a greatly terrified frame of mind. But in the morning he succumbs to a quick death, and if this misfortune were not enough, within three days, his sons and all his family follow him._\(^{13}\)

Whether individuals were infected with the bubonic, pneumonic or septicemic plague, tragedy was soon to follow.

**Tragic Responses**

The Black Death created pure chaos in Europe. The speed and complexity of the plague left people confused and afraid. There were accounts of children dying while their brothers and sisters were left unscathed. Entire cities were wiped off the map, but neighboring villages only counted a death toll in the single digits.\(^{14}\) This confusion led to panicked, and often tragic responses. Cities scrambled to try to stop the Black Death from killing their inhabitants. They did this in many different ways. Many cities quarantined ships as soon as they found out that they carried the disease, but often times it was too late, and the plague had already landed in the cities. Venice enforced strict laws on how people should live during the plague years and every precaution was taken to stop the spread. Public gondolas carried the dead to mass graves, and


interaction with the outside world was severely limited. Unfortunately, it was not enough, and Venice had a very high death toll. Milan, too, had a very extreme reaction to the plague. If a case of plague was reported, city officials boarded up the house leaving both healthy and sick inside to die. While this solution was cruel, it was also very effective, and Milan only experienced minimal deaths.

The Black Death’s destructive force and the impossibility of curing the plague at the time led to new and odd cultural practices. The Brotherhood of Flagellants, a group of religious zealots, sought to fend off the plague. They did so by parading for 35 days and whipping themselves in order to repent of their sins, believing this would prevent the judgement of the plague. Ironically, the bloodshed due to the whipping actually facilitated the spread of the plague.

The Tragic Failure of Medicine

Physicians in the fourteenth century based almost all of their medicine on the teachings of ancient Greek philosophers Hippocrates and Galen. These two philosophers lived 1,000 years before the Black Death, highlighting the meager advancements in medicine to help them understand or combat new diseases. Since medicine was based on astrology, philosophy, and

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even speculations, the physicians did not understand the nature of Yersinia Pestis, putting them in a hopeless situation. As physician to the pope, Guy De Chauliac wrote,

_The plague was shameful for physicians, who could give no help at all, especially out of fear of infection, they hesitated to visit the sick. Even if they did, they achieved nothing, and earned no fees, for all those who caught the plague died._

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Since there was no cure for the disease, most of the physicians who visited the sick also died. This was demoralizing as the plague spread so quickly not even the professionals could stop it due to their severely outdated methods.

**Relationships are Met with Tragedy**

The Black Death led to tragic changes in every relationship. As one resident of Siena wrote: “father abandoned child; wife, husband; one brother, another; for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and the sight. And no one could be found to bury the dead for money or for friendship.”

20 If one was sick, they were as good as dead since there would be no aid coming their way. Rather than offer assistance or comfort, many cities set up boards of health keeping the sick and healthy as far away from each other as possible. If anyone attempted to hide the sick from these boards they would be severely punished.

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19 de Chauliac, Gui. "Grande Chirugie (Great Surgery)." In The Black Death the Great Mortality of 1348-1350 a Brief History with Documents. N.p., 1363.


The hysteria surrounding the plague left many seeking answers as to a source. They often sought to place blame on those around them. Europeans were convinced that the plague was caused by a cloud of bad air and that it was manmade. Many European Catholics blamed the Jews. Even though Jews were experiencing high rates of infection, Catholics still held this belief. They interrogated Jews in order to get a confession out of them. Jews often confessed to impossible crimes just to get out of the torture they were experiencing. Once they “confessed” they were burned at the stake for their heinous crimes.

Eventually, these acts were brought to the attention of the Pope. This news troubled him, and he issued papal bulls against treating the Jews in this way. Even even with the papal influence the practice didn’t completely stop, and for many years there was an extreme distrust of outsiders as a result of the plague.

The Economy Tragically Collapses

The Black Death affected the economy in numerous ways. With the number of able-bodied and willing workers severely depleted, fewer goods were produced. Many countries and cities were extremely afraid of the outside world so foreign trade stopped almost completely.

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With so little production and trade, many products became scarce, leading to inflation. In addition to the workforce shrinking drastically, the number of people buying products decreased as well. Thus, the consumer had to buy products at a very high price and the producer struggled to sell enough products to make ends meet. The Black Death shortened the lifespan of the European population. As the most experienced workers died during the plague, the workforce could not learn many of the skills that the previous generation had possessed. With the large loss of life, Europe could no longer use the old economic system of feudalism.

**Social Triumph in Quality of Life**

By the end of the plague, many peasants expecting to die decided to indulge themselves in their last few days rather than work. The only way that they would work is to receive higher wages and lower rent. If the lord wasn’t willing to meet these demands, the peasants simply got up and left, an act unthinkable before the plague. The wealthy landowners were so desperate for work though, that they were willing to put up with the high demands and runaway peasants.

The increase in wages was higher than the inflation of goods so this led to many triumphs in the quality of life for the lower classes. With more coins in their pockets, peasants could

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afford luxuries previously exclusive to the upper class. This changed the social demographics of Europe and allowed for upward mobility. In the thousand years preceding the plague, peasants were bound to the estate that they were born in for their entire lives. After the plague, there were many vacant farms due to death. Peasants who escaped from their lords, to start their own family farms on developed estates.

The plague also brought about many positive changes in the agricultural industry. Before the Black Death, farming was solely focused on feeding Europe’s soaring population. After the plague, the population was no longer taxing the limits of their natural resources. This allowed some farmers to grow luxury crops and reintroduce meat into their diet. With the labor force depleted, many lords restructured their estates so they did not have to pay the high wages that peasants were now demanding. This was accomplished by changing what they produced in favor of less labor-intensive commodities such as raising livestock. With more meats being consumed, the average European benefited from increased protein in their diet. The living conditions for peasants continued to rise, creating a social and cultural triumph of the middle class.

**Intellectual Triumphs**

With a decline in the population, daily tasks that had once been completed by the working class remained unfinished. In order to thrive, individuals from all classes needed to find cheaper and more efficient means for completing their work. It was during the time period

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following the Black Death that they began to introduce machines and practices that were more efficient and economically sound.

Farming was one aspect of society affected by these changes. Before the Black Death, there was a surplus of workers that allowed feudalism to flourish. After the Black Death, however, the lords could not rely on masses of peasants to produce their crops. This led them to begin using the concept of the mill. With the introduction of the mill, labor that would take a hundred workers was finished in a much shorter time.\(^{34}\)

The unstoppable force of the Black Death showed that the current forms of medicine had to change immensely to prevent such a disaster from happening again. Before the plague, much of medicine was philosophical, and based on astrology as well as the Ancient Greeks. Some of these medical practices actually helped the spread of the plague.\(^{35}\)

One of the main reasons that the Black Death caused so much devastation is that Europe had very poor hygiene and sanitation, the perfect environment for flea-bearing rats.\(^{36}\) Following its spread, the common people were educated on how to keep away from sickness and disease through sanitation and hygiene. While they didn’t know about microorganisms, they did begin to recognize what was healthy and sanitary. Physicians and the well educated also began to make observations on the behavior of diseases and how the human body works.\(^{37}\) In 1377, Florence


mandated that a “book of the dead” must be kept that showed all deaths in the city and the cause of death. The first public autopsies took place during the Black Death. This helped the surgeons and physicians that were not university educated to have a better understanding of human physiology. The intellectual triumph of advancement in medicine expanded the knowledge of the human body so diseases could be better dealt with in the future.

Conclusion

The Black Death was a natural disaster that killed roughly half of Europe’s population in the 14th century. It also severely damaged the psyche of the survivors. The healthy abused the sick out of fear of infection and many sought to blame and torture the Jewish population as they looked for a scapegoat. With much of the workforce depleted, the former economic system of feudalism could no longer be sustained. This inspired the remaining members of society to approach life from a different perspective leading to many social and intellectual triumphs that revolutionized their society.


Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

This is the introduction to Boccaccio's Decameron. This highlights how relationships deteriorated and the different ways people coped with the plague. This helped me to understand how people dealt with the plague.

This is a Florentine Chronicle from the 1380s. It writes about different changes that city officials made due to the plague. This helped me understand what specific laws were put into place due to the Black Death, proving that the plague changed laws in the Middle Ages.

de Chauliac, Gui. "Grande Chirugie (Great Surgery)." In The Black Death the Great Mortality of 1348-1350 a Brief History with Documents. N.p., 1363.
This is a portion from A Partial Inventory or Collection of Surgical Medicine. It covered the symptoms of the plague and how de Chauliac treated them. This provided me with a good quote about the scale of the plague.

This is the chronicle of the Italian town of Sienna from during the plague years. This depicts how the plague entered Sienna and how the city responded. I used this for a quote to show how much civilization had declined due to the plague.

This is a letter by the King of England about a treatment for the plague. His suggestions for curing the plague show how confused the European population was since the treatment is very different from what can actually cure the plague.

This is an account of the Jacquerie. This was an uprising of peasants in 1358. This showed that the Black Death helped give the peasants more confidence and power throughout Europe. It helped me prove how peasants were able to defy their Lords and force a higher standard of living for all peasants.

This is a paper by Abū Ja’far Ahmad Ibn Khātima about how to defend against the plague. It provided everything from prevention and protection from the plague to how to react when the plague was in its later stages. This helped me understand what the people of the time were trying to do to prevent the plague.


This is a letter of Francesco Petrarch to Louis Sanctus about the Black Death. In it Petrarch lamented over how God chose his generation to punish the sins of the previous generations. I got one quote from this that Used in my paper.


This is a letter from the king of England that attempts to stop the increase of wages for peasants after the plague. This shows how the elites were creating laws to keep the peasants from gaining power, but the peasants gained power in wages regardless.


This is a letter from Louis Sanctus of Avignon that describes all three types of plague. This is remarkable since the people of the time did not have any the tools to identify septicemic plague. Sanctus was very close to the top medical thinkers of the time so it is likely this is the extent of what the medieval people could recognize.
Secondary Sources


This is an Encyclopedia Britannica article about the practice of flagellation. It helped me understand the history of flagellation and how it morphed into what was practiced during the plague.


This is a book about the Black Death that includes many primary sources from people who experienced the event. This helped me understand how little people knew about the Black Death and what they thought it was. It also helped me see what the actual people thought not just someone’s interpretation of it.


This is a A&E documentary from 1997 about the Black Death. This informed me about the path of the Black Death and how Europe responded to it. I learned mainly how poorly medieval physicians were trained and how unprepared Europe was for the Black Death. It helped me understand how much devastation mentally, as well as physically, the Black Death caused.


This is an Encyclopedia Britannica article regarding the Black Death. This article helped me learn more about how the Black Death got to Europe and where it originated. It also helped me learn about the nature of the plague. The source also helped me understand how much the Jews were thought of as the creators of the Black Death.


This is a section from a Brown website on the Decameron that is focusing on the social and economic impacts of the plague. It helped me understand that the lack of trade helped cause the collapse of the economy along with the lack of production. It also helped give credibility to the information of previous sources.


This is a Ph.D dissertation by Anna Campbell about how the educated responded to the Black Death. This informed me about how medicine and education changed because of the Black Death. This helped me understand how medicine became based on experiments and results, rather than logical thinking.
This is an article about the Black Death from the Ancient History Encyclopedia. This was the first article I looked at so it gave me exposure to the topic. This was a very basic covering of the Black Death so it helped me learn the path, symptoms, and time frame of the Black Death. This article helped me understand how large of a disaster the Black Death really was.

This is a chapter from the book Epidemics and Pandemics about the Great Mortality (Black Death). This gave me more detail about the nature of the Black Death than other sources. It also showed me how the standards of Europe deteriorated over the course of the plague.

This is a book regarding The Black Death by Tracee De Hahn. This book covered everything about the Black Death and how it affected Europe. It helped me learn about how the Black Death spread, how it infected its victims, and how Europe tried to stop it’s spread. It helped me understand how the Black Death worked and what it did to Europe.

This is a chapter from the book Biohazards about the Black Death. This source taught me the numbers and science of the Black Death. It also helped me learn some of the strategies that people used to try to stop the Black Death.

This is a book by David Herlihy about how the Black Death affected Europe in the years following the Black Death. This source helped give me a deeper understanding about the Black Deaths causes and effects. It informed me of what helped cause the Black Death and how it affected the economy. This source helped me understand how the Black Death hurt Europe in many more ways than just the loss of population. It also helped me understand some of the more long term impacts of the Black Death.

This is an article about how farming changed after the Black Death. It helped me understand that after the plague more of a variety of foods were being produced which led to a more balanced diet for the common population.
This is a BBC article about the Black Death. This informed me on the science of the Black Death. This means the symptoms, survival rate, and the different strains of the plague. I learned that there were 3 different types of The Black Death and how each one of the strains worked. It helped me understand how the Black Death killed people and how deadly it truly was.

This is an article about the Black Death and how the Jews were persecuted due to the plague. This source helped me understand that there was a general distrust of Jews throughout the Middle Ages that helped lead to their treatment throughout the plague.

This is an article by Shane Mghaun about the eruption of Mt. Rinjani and the natural disasters that it caused. It helped me understand the “year without a summer” and how it helped lead to the Black Death. I used this in my paper to give examples of the disasters helping to cause the Black Death.

This is a paper by Lynn Harry Nelson about the Black Death and the Great Famine of 1315 and how the two natural disasters relate to each other. This helped me understand some of the causes of the Black Death.

This is a paper about Miasmatic Theory. This was the main belief of the cause of the plague. Miasmatic theory is the belief that disease is called due to the corruption of the air. This helped me understand what the common belief for the plague was.

This is a Thesis paper by Sarah Vanneste of Wayne State University about the medical advancements in medical practices due to the Black Death. It helped me understand how the heads of medicine responded to the Black Death.