

The Black Death: What was it and how would you have reacted?

Background Info: "Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish ... The entire inhabited world changed" Ibn Khaldun, 14th Century Muslim historian.

It was called the Great Plague or the Black Death and wherever it went, it brought death. In 1346 European traders heard reports about plague in faraway China. Little did they know then that the plague, or the widespread disease, they were hearing about would follow the trade routes to the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. In five short years, the plague killed between 25% and 45% of the populations of those areas. It was the most destructive disease in the history of the world.

In those times, bacteria and viruses were unknown. Today, we think that the Black Death was caused by bacteria that travelled through fleas. These fleas lived in the fur of rats and other rodents. The flea bit infected rats and bit humans, passing the infection on. Symptoms of the plagues included chills, high fever, hallucinations and inflamed pus-filled bumps. Within three to six days, most plague sufferers were dead.

During the mid -14th century, when the worst of the plague struck, religion was the most powerful force in the lives of most people. In this part of the world, most people were either Christian or Muslim. Adapted from The DBQ Project: [Black Death DBQ](#)



Illustration of the Black Death from the Toggenburg Bible, 1411. (Wikipedia)

Doc 1: Agnolo de Tura (The Fat)'s report 1348 from Italy

Source: Chronicler Agnolo di Tura (The Fat), *Cronaca senese*, Italy, 1348. In Robert Gottfried, *The Black Death*, New York: The Free Press, 1983.

The mortality (death) in Siena (Italy) began in May (1348). It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and pitiless ways. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath their armpits and in their groins and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife abandoned husband, one brother abandoned another. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without a priest. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds,

both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I, Agnolo di Tura, buried my five children with my own hands ... And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

Doc 2: William Dene's report c. 1350 from England

Source: William Dene, chronicler in Rochester, England, circa 1350, in Sir Arthur Bryant, *The Age of Chivalry: The Atlantic Saga*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963.

The people, for the most part, became ever more depraved (wicked), more prone to every vice (immoral habit) and more inclined than ever before to evil and wickedness, not thinking of death nor of the past plague nor of their own salvation (saving) ... Priests, little weighing the sacrifice of a contrite (guilty) spirit, betook themselves to where they could get larger stipends (pay) than in their own benefices (districts), on which many benefices remained unserved. Day by day, the dangers to souls both in clergy and people multiplied ... The laborers (workers) and skilled workmen were imbued (inspired) with such a spirit of rebellion that neither king, law, nor justice could curb them.

Doc 3: Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354 from Syria

Source: Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325 - 1354*.

(As a result of the plague) the people fasted (went without food) for three successive days ... (Afterward they) assembled in the great mosque until it was filled to overflowing ... and spent the night there in prayers ... Then, after performing the dawn prayer ... they all went out together ... carrying Korans in their hands. The entire population of the city joined ... The Jews went out with their book of the law and the Christians with the gospel (Bible) ... all of them in tears ... imploring (begging) the favor of God through His books and His prophets.

*Note Ibn Battuta was a world traveler in the fourteenth century. He travelled throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe writing of his experiences. Battuta encountered the Black Death in Damascus (modern Syria) and again in North Africa.

"RAFT" Assignment: Imagine you have just lived through the Black Death, where 1/3 of your community has died. You have received the following letter from a family member who is living far away:

Dear _____,

We hope this letter finds you in good health! We have received news that your town has suffered through the recent Plague, which we call the Black Death. This disease has not yet come to our town, but we are afraid that it will. Please tell us about your experiences with this horrible time, what this plague is like, and how the survivors reacted. Please give us any advice you may have to help us through this terrible time. Thank you! Stay well!

Love, your family

Please write a brief (one complete paragraph; 5-8 sentences) letter back to your family member. Be sure to include the following:

- What the Black Death was like, physically, and how it affected people's bodies
- How the survivors reacted to this plague. *Give details* from each of the three primary sources.
- What advice you have for your family if the plague were to come to their town.