The Black Death

The historical context

In the mid-fourteenth century, the plague pandemic first known as the Great Dying and later as the Black Death arrived from Central Asia to afflict Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Carried by infected fleas that infested black rats, clothing, bedding, or human body hair, the plague appeared first in Europe and the Middle East in ports. Then it progressed quickly along rivers and roads into towns and cities, progressing more slowly into rural areas inland. Bubonic plague, the most common form of the disease, killed people in three to five days. It began with high fever climbing to 105 degrees, then it caused convulsions, vomiting, and agonizingly painful swellings. Those sores, or buboes, which gave their name to the disease, appeared in the lymph glands and could be the size of an egg or apple. Between two-thirds and four-fifths of those bitten by the fleas and infected by the disease died. The pneumonic form of the plague affected the lungs and could be transmitted directly from person to person by coughing, sneezing, or even breathing. This form was always fatal and could kill within a matter of hours.

All in all, during the initial half-century or so of recurring outbreaks, about one-third to one-half of the population died in the areas that the plague reached. In crowded cities, the death toll was higher and dying was faster. For instance, in the Italian town of Pistoia (where population had already dropped significantly owing to the famines of the early fourteenth century), it is estimated that about two-thirds of the population died during the plague’s first occurrence in 1348. Three more waves of the plague afflicted the city before 1400. In the last of these, half the remaining population died. In the next half-century or so, the plague returned six more times.

Medical knowledge at the time was helpless in the face of the disease. People did not agree on what caused it or on how to treat it. Many different explanations were put forward, drawing on both pre-existing beliefs and actual observations. The most widespread theories were God’s anger with sinful humanity, the malign influence of comets, the conjunction of planets, and the activities of demons and devils. Several learned authorities thought “tainted air” was the cause, since illness was known to be associated with rotting corpses, the reeking filth, and the fetid mists rising from swamps. Some argued that exposure to those people already sick, or to objects contaminated by contact with them, caused infection. At times, sheer human malice was blamed.

Although many doctors, officials, and ordinary people admitted that nothing anyone did seemed to make a difference, people took a number of religious, magical, and practical measures to try to prevent or cure the plague. These ranged from religious rituals to strict enforcement of existing sanitary laws to control garbage and urban pollution; from burning the possessions of those who died of the infection to burning Jews, who could be handy scapegoats; from restrictions on travel to the use of magical talismans and spells; from bloodletting for the healthy to surgery on the buboes.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that two men, Alexandre Yersin and Kitasato Shibasaburo, independently discovered the bacillus that causes bubonic plague. Subsequently, Professor M. Ogata in Tokyo proved that fleas taken from infected rats carried the bacillus. Then, by observing bites on the legs of victims, in 1897 P. L. Simond proved that fleas transmitted the plague from sick rodents to the humans they bit. Development of antibiotics after World War II provided effective medication against the plague. The disease continues to occur in smaller-scale outbreaks in various parts of the world today. The plague bacillus remains alive.
and well among wild rodent populations in a number of places, including the western United States. It is still capable of infecting people. In some campgrounds and other public areas, signs warn people to stay away from squirrels or other rodents because these animals could be infected.

Many features of fourteenth-century life encouraged the spread of the plague. Thatched roofs, wattle-and-daub walls, household trash, and straw on floors and in bedding provided nesting places and food for infected black rats and fleas. When sick rats died, the fleas that infested them looked for other hosts. Human bodies and woolen clothes, both unwashed, were comfortable habitats for fleas. Long-distance trade, Christian pilgrimages, the march of armies, and the custom of nobles and the households of moving from manor to manor were all ways that infected rats, fleas, and people carried the plague from place to place. Medieval towns and villages were crowded, and within houses whole families sometimes lived packed together in a small room, which they often shared with domestic animals.

Although the plague killed both rich and poor, mortality among the latter was higher. The rich lived in houses more likely to have stone floors and walls with tile roofs, locked-away food supplies, and less contact with garbage, making their homes less attractive and accessible to rats. It is noteworthy that King Alfonso IX of Castile was the only crowned head of Europe who died of the plague. He contracted it when he refused to leave his troops after the plague broke out both among his own and the enemy soldiers. Mortality was also higher than average among physicians and priests, because they attended the sick and dying. One city’s careful records show that there were nine municipal physicians and eighteen barber-surgeons in the population of about 12,000. But only one physician and two barber-surgeons survived.

Historians’ judgments about the effects of the Black Death have varied. In the short term, the huge die-off brought a serious labor shortage. One early result of this was a mini-boom in the slave trade in some areas such as northern Italy. Entire villages were abandoned and untilled fields were converted to pasture for sheep. After the initial crisis, wages and therefore the standard of living rose for working people who had survived. Over the long term, the experience of the plague contributed to the establishment of government-controlled public health boards, the use of quarantine, and more university-oriented training for medical professionals. Because of the difficulty of replacing victims, such as priests and officials, who knew Latin, the Black Death also led to the vernacular languages. It also contributed to changes in settlement patterns such as the eastward migration of Jewish communities fleeing the plague and the accompanying persecutions. Out of this period emerged the shtetl culture of eastern Europe.

Another widespread effect was increased tension between upper and lower classes. The rich who survived had more wealth concentrated in their hands, having inherited from all who had died. The working classes, however, also held a stronger hand because the scarcity of labor encouraged them to demand higher pay and greater freedoms. Resentments and conflicts of interest between the classes led to uprisings in a number of countries both among serfs and peasants in the countryside and workers in the cities. The Peasant Rebellion in England in 1381 is a well-known example.

Some have seen popular loss of confidence in Church and political authorities as contributing to greater individualism and to a rising interest in personal, mystical religious beliefs. That is, the plague was part of the background to both the Renaissance and the Reformation. The constant
nearness of death made salvation of immediate importance. Yet the clergy, who as the educated class should have been able to explain and deal with the plague, failed to do so. Too often, priests also failed to live up to their idealized image as selfless individuals. Therefore, people increasingly took the acquisition of salvation, at least in part, into their own hands by emphasizing the importance of “good works.” There was significant increase in charitable giving, especially to hospitals, new chapels, and pilgrimage centers. In the arts, themes connected with death were popular. Contemporaries described the psychological effects as swinging between the pole of frantic pleasure-seeking to the pole of ardent religious faith, which often tipped toward fanaticism.

Though this unit focuses on Europe, the Black Death and the recurring plague had equally far-reaching effects in north Africa, the Middle East, and Inner Eurasia, and probably in China. Epidemic disease and the disruptions that went along with the massive die-off may have been a factor in the collapse of Mongol rule in China, the weakening of the Mamluk Empire in Egypt and Syria, a general downswing of production and trade all across Afroeurasia, and a widespread shift of populations from rural areas to towns and cities.

As a final note, the term Black Death normally refers to the first onslaught of the plague that, between 1346 and 1352, swept from the Black Sea region across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Europe. Scholars do not refer to recurrences of the plague in the following decades as Black Death, nor do they use the misnomer Black Plague.

An illustration of the flea that transmits plague

Rats that carry fleas which transmit the plague bacterium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1306</td>
<td>France and England renew their periodic expelling of Jews</td>
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<tr>
<td>1309</td>
<td>Pope moves his court to Avignon under pressure from French king, starting the so-called “Babylonian Captivity” of the Church</td>
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<td>First continent-wide famine in 250 years due to excessive rainfall (climate had being getting colder and wetter since late thirteenth century)</td>
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<td>1310-19</td>
<td>Decade of failing harvests and famine in large areas of western Europe</td>
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<td>1318-20</td>
<td>Cattle pest and sheep disease decimates herds and flocks</td>
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<td>1321-22</td>
<td>Europe-wide harvest failures</td>
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<tr>
<td>1324-25</td>
<td>Widespread murrain (disease) of sheep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1323-28</td>
<td>Peasant revolts in Flanders against landlord nobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1325</td>
<td>Return of sheep murrain</td>
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<tr>
<td>1331</td>
<td>Widespread epidemic disease in China, which some consider to have been plague</td>
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<tr>
<td>1335-36</td>
<td>Europe-wide famine</td>
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<tr>
<td>1337</td>
<td>Hundred Years’ War between England and France begins; French king employs Middle-Eastern mercenary ships from the Levant</td>
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<td>Death of Florentine painter Giotto, who led the way in introducing naturalism, the style that developed and flourished during the Renaissance</td>
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<tr>
<td>1338</td>
<td>Embassy from Great Khan of Mongols arrives at Avignon, asking pope to re-establish friendly relations. Pope sends thirty-two missionaries with gifts in response, who reach Peking in 1341 and return after three years there</td>
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<tr>
<td>1340</td>
<td>“The Merchant’s Handbook” by an Italian author reports that the road from China to the Black Sea is safe to travel both day and night</td>
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Conjunction of three planets: notoriously malevolent Saturn, hot and humid Jupiter, and fiery Mars, later claimed as cause of Black Death

Ottoman Turks cross into Europe to intervene in the Byzantine empire’s civil war

Urban workers in Florence revolt against the ruling class following civil war

Poor harvests and major famines in many areas

Mongol troops on the Black Sea infected with plague

English army of commoners with longbows on foot defeats French mounted nobility at battle of Crécy

Outbreak of the Black Death in Constantinople, Sicily, Genoa, and Alexandria

Turkish and Serb armies fighting in the Byzantine civil war harass the Balkans

The Black Death reaches France, England, Tunisia, and Mecca (Arabia)

Blaming of Jews for the plague begins, though Pope issues official statements declaring their innocence

Plague-ravaged England and France declare a truce in the Hundred Years’ War

Pope issues condemnation of flagellants

Black Death reaches Scandinavia

Often-given conventional date for the beginning of the Renaissance

English law, the *Statute of Laborers*, fixes wages at 1346 levels

The Black Death reaches Moscow

Italian humanist Boccaccio’s book, *The Decameron*, describes the Black Death in Florence
1354 England and France resume the Hundred Years’ War
1355 Founder of Ming Dynasty leads revolt against Mongol domination of China
1358 Massive peasant uprising, the *Jacquerie*, in France
1360 Tamerlane becomes chief of his tribe
1361 Europe-wide recurrence of plague, with mortality especially high among children. Hereafter, there are local, regional, and sometimes wider recurrences of the plague every 5-12 years or so
1368 The Mongol (Yuan) dynasty in China is replaced by the Ming dynasty
1374 Quarantine imposed by the Venetian Republic on ships found infected with plague
1375 Death of the poet Petrarch, among the first and most influential of Renaissance humanists
1376 John Wycliff claims any good man can act as priest, allows women to preach, asserts that reading the Bible for oneself negates need for guidance from Church, and begins translation of Bible into English
1378 Great Schism in Catholic Church: two popes are elected, each denouncing the authority of the other
1378-1383 Uprisings of urban workers, journeymen, peasants in France, Flanders, and Italy
1381 Peasant revolt in England against serfdom, and unpopular taxes
1382 Europe-wide recurrence of plague
1391 Major pogrom in Spain, again scapegoating Jews for new outbreak of plague
1393 Tamerlane’s Mongol horsemen add Mesopotamia to their earlier conquests in Persia, Afghanistan, Russia, and elsewhere. Five years later, they will invade India
Everyone Felt He Was Doomed to Die.

Historical background

Boccaccio was the illegitimate son of a merchant family. Although poetry was his love from an early age, his father made him serve an apprenticeship in commerce. He studied law for a while, and traveled on business in Italy and France. He was not in Florence in 1348 when the Black Death struck the city, though he described it in his masterpiece, the book called The Decameron. It is a book of stories in which seven young women and three young men of Florence leave the city for the hills. They are fleeing the plague which, according to Boccaccio, killed upwards of 100,000 people during its height from March to July. In the stories, the young people amuse themselves by taking turns telling tales. Many authors later borrowed the plots of these tales. Although Boccaccio’s vivid portrait of plague-infested Florence was not an eyewitness account, he certainly had plenty of opportunity to talk to those who were survivors of the epidemic.

In 1350, when he returned to Florence, he became a friend of the humanist man of letters, Petrarch. The two of them became important figures in the early Renaissance. As a humanist, Boccaccio bought and copied many neglected manuscripts of classical literature and history. He also promoted the study of Greek, so that the newly-collected books in this language could be read in Italy. Acclaimed as an author, he traveled as a diplomat in the service of the Republic of Florence. Therefore, his ideas could be widely influential.

Florence was an inland city, but located on the navigable Arno river. At the time of the Black Death, its records show about 100,000 inhabitants. It had 200 establishments producing high quality cloth which, along with customs dues and income from banking services, enriched the republic. It was a center of arts and letters, with many fine buildings, pictures, and libraries. It was not immune, however, to famine, which struck in 1340, followed by rioting of the poor against the wealthy, and civil war. Famine recurred in 1347. The following year, according to the reputable Florentine historian Villani, three-fifths of the city’s population died of the Black Death. In fact, it later killed Villani himself.

This mortality, however, was not for lack of people trying to cope with the disaster. A committee of eight was formed and given near-dictatorial powers. They refused entrance to the walled city to any who were sick, enforced stringent regulations against garbage in the streets, forbade large public gatherings at funerals, and arranged for the collection of corpses and their burial layered in trenches after graveyard space ran out. Their measures were unsuccessful, and lapsed when not enough personnel were left to enforce them. For five months, the plague continued to rage. Nevertheless, only three years later, Florence was able to make war on the lord of Milan who tried to dominate the city. Soon after, Florence expelled bands of mercenaries that had invaded its territory.
Primary Source

Into the distinguished city of Florence, more noble than any other Italian city, there came the deadly pestilence. It started in the East, either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God’s just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, and it killed an infinite number of people. Without pause it spread from one place and it stretched its miserable length over the West. And against the pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with this task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health. …

[I]t began in both men and women with certain swellings either in the groin or under the armpits, some of which grew to the size of a normal apple and others to the size of an egg (more or less), and the people called them *gavoccioli*. And from the two parts of the body already mentioned, within a brief space of time, the said deadly *gavoccioli* began to spread indiscriminately over every part of the body; and after this, the symptoms of the illness changed to black or livid spots appearing on the arms and thighs, and on every part of the body, some large ones and sometimes many little ones scattered all around. … Neither a doctor’s advice nor the strength of medicine could do anything to cure this illness; on the contrary, either the nature of the illness was such that if afforded no cure, or else the doctors were so ignorant that they did not recognize its cause and, as a result, could not prescribe the proper remedy (in fact, the number of doctors, other than the well-trained, was increased by a large number of men and women who had never had any medical training) at any rate, few of the sick were ever cured, and almost all died after the third day of the appearance of the previously described symptoms (some sooner, others later), and most of them died without fever or any other side-effects.

This pestilence was so powerful that it was communicated to the healthy by contact with the sick, the way a fire close to dry or oily things will set them aflame. And the evil of the plague went even further: not only did talking to or being around the sick bring infection and a common death, but also touching the clothes of the sick or anything touched or used by them seemed to communicate this very disease to the person involved. …

Everyone felt he was doomed to die and, as a result, abandoned his property, so that most of the houses had become common property, and any stranger who came upon them used them as if he were their rightful owner. In addition to this bestial behavior, they always managed to avoid the sick as best they could. And in this great affliction and misery of our city the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick or so short of help that it was impossible for them to fulfill their duties; as a result, everyone was free to do as he pleased. …

Thus, for countless multitude of men and women who fell sick there remained no support except the charity of their friends (and these were few) or the avarice of servants, who worked for inflated salaries … And since the sick were abandoned by their neighbors, their parents, and their friends and there was a scarcity of servants, a practice that was almost unheard of before spread through the city: when a woman fell sick, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble she
might be, she did not mind having a manservant (whoever he might be, no matter how young or old he was), and she had no shame whatsoever in revealing any part of her body to him—the way she would have done to a woman—when the necessity of her sickness required her to do so. This practice was, perhaps, in the days that followed the pestilence, the cause of looser morals in the women who survived the plague. …

![Doctors at the bedside of a plague victim](image)


The plight of the lower class and, perhaps, a large part of the middle class, was … pathetic: most of them stayed in their homes or neighborhoods either because of their poverty or their hopes for remaining safe, and every day they fell sick by the thousands; and not having servants or attendants of any kind, they almost always died. Many ended their lives in the public streets, during the day or at night, while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of the decomposing bodies. The city was full of corpses. …

In the scattered villages and in the fields the poor, miserable peasants and their families, without any medical assistance or aid of servants died on the roads and in the fields and in their homes, as many by day as by night, and they died not like men but more like wild animals. Because of this they, like the city dwellers, became careless in their ways and did not look after their possessions or their businesses; furthermore, when they saw that death was upon them,
completely neglecting the future fruits of their past labors, their livestock, their property, they did their best to consume what they already had at hand. So, it came about that oxen, donkeys, sheep, pigs, chickens, and even dogs, man’s most faithful companion, were driven from their homes into the fields, where the wheat was left not only unharvested but also unreaped, and they were allowed to roam where they wished. …

Oh how many great palaces, beautiful homes, and noble dwellings, once filled with families, gentlemen, and ladies, were now emptied, down to the last servant! How many notable families, vast domains, and famous fortunes remained without legitimate heir! …

Reflecting upon so many miseries makes me very sad. …

I Buried my Five Children with my Own Hands

Historical background

Agnolo di Tura was a chronicler in Siena, a city of about 60,000 some 30 miles south of Florence. In 1348, it was a great banking center and wealthy enough to be building what the citizens intended to be the greatest church in Christendom. But in that year, Siena was hit very hard by the Black Death. Di Tura, who survived it though all his family died, claimed that after the plague had passed, only 10,000 people remained alive. The records do not allow us to know exact figures, but certainly there is evidence that the city suffered unusually high losses. Construction work on the cathedral was halted and never resumed. Both the university and the wool-processing industry closed down. Laymen filled posts usually reserved for clergymen because so many priests died. Many estates, left with no heirs at all, were taken over by a much-reduced city council. The civil courts ceased to meet. When recovery set in, the authorities acted quickly to identify the taxpayers that remained and to impose a new tax in order to pay much higher salaries that soldiers and government employees were demanding. This, however, led to poverty in the countryside, a wave of immigration to higher-paying jobs in the city, and increased tension between haves and have-nots, with an accompanying rise in crime and financial problems. Siena probably never fully recovered from the effects of the Black Death.

The Cathedral of Siena, Italy

The tall wall with the arches on the left side of the illustration was to be the façade of a much more magnificent church. A great nave, or main longitudinal area of the church, was to extend from the façade back to the tower and dome. The Black Death, however, killed so many people in Siena in 1348 that the work came to a halt and was never resumed.

Photo by Jeanne Dunn
The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. 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 priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep 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.