

Bradley Potter

Mrs. Dearborn

English 9 Comprehensive

19 April 2009

The Black Death: A Terrible and Unpredictable Impact

The most disastrous epidemic to effect Europe ever, let alone the world, the Black Plague is known to every elementary student as it is drilled into every American's head in every high school history class. It is commonly referred to as the Black Death, which is most likely a mistranslation of the Latin words *atra* meaning both *terrible* and *black* (Corazine 42). It swept through Europe more than once, but the most devastating occurrence was between 1346 and 1353 C.E. (or A.D.) when the plague killed millions in its wake. Even though it occurred 650 years ago, the plague is still talked about today due to its tremendous impact on human life, both positive and negative.

Joan Acocella notes, in her 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% (42), which is the equivalent of two billion people when measured against Europe's population today (Benedictow) . Most major cities lost more than half of their total population. According to the historian Boccaccio, "more than half of the inhabitants of the northern Italian city of Florence perished, and mortality figures for other European cities and regions were no less horrific" (Nardo 18). As the Black Death continued, even rural villages were impacted by its fatal blow. The Black Plague killed 7,500 victims a day (Alchin). All that stood in its path were put to the test of survival. The world was in chaos.

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 (Biel 2).

There are multiple forms of The Black Plague. The best known is the Bubonic Plague. With this form, the victim developed swellings on the neck, armpits, or groin. For most, an outbreak of these symptoms “signaled the victim had a life expectancy of up to a week” (Trueman). A second type is Pneumonic, which attacks the lungs. These victims had only one to two days to live. The third type is Septicemic, which attacks the blood system. The name comes from the fact that, no matter the symptoms, the affected area would eventually turn black (Svenson).

Meanwhile, sometime around the mid-1340s, a group of Mongols besieged an outskirt European trading station call 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 very advanced, so ships needed to dock every three to four days.

Due to the constant contact with humans, the *yersinia pestis* bacteria (black plague)

jumped from the black rats 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 numerous 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 image from Constantinople through Mediterranean Europe to Italy (42). The city of Marseilles served as the “spread center” (42) or the place where the epidemic was most focused. Next it continued to Spain, then inland to Paris, through Normandy, Germany, then to England. In England the most focused area of impact was London. 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 (Ziegler 19). With so many dead, each morning a cart rode through town. The driver of the cart would yell something similar to “Bring down your dead!”, so people brought their dead. They put them in the cart where they were delivered to the graveyard (Alchin). 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, according to historian Don Nardo, that “in many places in Sienna great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of the dead....and there were also those who were so sparsely covered

with earth that dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies” (26). Eventually, the graveyards became full, and the Pope consecrated the Rhone River so bodies could be dumped into the river. Because priests were also victims, laypeople were allowed to administer last rites (26). Those who did survive believed God was watching over them and that they had been chosen to survive (“The Black Death of 1348 to 1350”).

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 24). Others thought Christian believers amassed to kill vast numbers of Jews because they believed that Jews were the cause of the Plague (25).

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, an Italian writer who benefited from the Black Plague by using it as the setting for his masterpiece the Decameron (“Giovanni” 3) stated, “[b]rother abandoned brother... fathers and mothers refused to see and tend to their children” (Branca 3). Boccaccio felt the plague was an example of those of every class being caught in “daily and extraordinary battles against ill-fortune” (8), especially those in his own class, the mercantile class.

In just five years, over one-third of Europe’s population was dead: 25 million people (“The Black Death: Bubonic”) Consequently, a number of areas of daily life were impacted. 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 fields were left to rot. As a result, people ate cats and dogs, and some even turned to cannibalism. Artisans lost 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 [his] testimony as a fable” (Ziegler 33). In addition, nothing flourished in this time period, including inventions, artwork, or crafts (32). The population was bogged down by the daily fight for survival and had neither time nor energy for creativity.

The historical aspects of the Plague are interesting. However, it is necessary to 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 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

Acocella, Jan. "The End of the World." *The New Yorker*, vol. 101, no.7, 2005, pp. 25-28.

EBSCOhost.

Alchin, Linda K. "Black Death." *The Middle Ages*, <http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/>

medieval-history/black-death.htm.

Benedictow, Ole J. "The Black Death: The Greatest Catastrophe Ever." *History Today*, vol. 55,

no. 3, 2005.

Biel, Timothy Levi. *The Black Death*. Lucent Books, 1989, pp. 221-232.

"The Black Death: Bubonic Plague." *TheMiddleAges.net*, www.themiddleages.net/plague.html.

"The Black Death of 1348 to 1350." *The History Learning Site*, 2016, [www.historylearningsite.](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/medieval-england/the-black-death-of-1348-to-1350/)

co.uk/medieval-england/the-black-death-of-1348-to-1350/.

Branca, V. "Giovanni Boccaccio." *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2003. *Gale Biography In*

Context, Gale Document Number: K2587503213.

Corazine, Phyllis. *Black Death*. Lucent Books, 1997, pp. 14-52.

"Giovanni Boccaccio." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 1998. *Gale Biography In Context*,

Gale Document Number: K1631000745.

McMullin, Jordan. *Black Death*. Greenhaven Press, 2003, pp. 14-52.

Nardo, Don. *The Black Death*. Greenhaven Press, 1999, pp. 16-26.

Svenson, Lyle. "The Black Death." University of Minnesota, 1997, [www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/](http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/tbacig/hmcl1005/plague/)

tbacig/hmcl1005/plague/.

"The Black Death, 1348." *EyeWitness to History*, 2001, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/plague.htm)

plague.htm.

Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death: Plague of Europe*. John Day Company, 1969, pp. 18-42.