

The Black Death

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 known as the Great Pestilence, the Great Plague, the Black Death. Wherever it struck it brought fear and unimaginable heartbreak. By 1346 European traders had begun hearing rumors about great cataclysms that were wreaking havoc in China which included a fearful plague. Little did they know that this plague was already moving quickly along the same trade routes they themselves used and would soon be on the doorstep of the Middle East and Europe. In five short years, it would kill between 25-45% of the populations it encountered. It would be the worst natural disaster and the single most destructive natural phenomenon in the history of the world.

Causes and Symptoms

From Cairo to Paris, medical knowledge in the 14th century was primitive compared to today. Bacteria and viruses were largely unknown to doctors. They were certainly unknown to the general public. Although the causes of the plague are still debated by historians today, most believe the Black Death was caused by bacterial strains. These strains lived in the stomach of certain fleas which live in the fur of rodents, particularly the black rat. Through a complicated process it is possible for these bacteria strains to become unstable in the fleas. If this occurs, the fleas then infect the rats. When the rats die, the fleas will fly to another host. If the new host is human, a plague epidemic will erupt. By the mid-14th century a complex trading network connecting Asia to the Middle East and to all of Europe spread migrating rats and their parasitic fleas across much of the known world.



The Black Death was actually a combination of three plagues from three bacterial strains: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The most common was bubonic. Symptoms included chills, high fever, delirium, vomiting, and rapid heartbeat. The infected person would then develop inflamed swellings filled with pus referred to as “buboes.” Buboes could be as large as eggs and usually appeared in the armpit or groin area. These buboes were extremely painful and with three to six days of their appearance, 50-80% of the victims died. Pneumonic plague was less common but more deadly; it infected the respiratory system and killed most of its victims, usually in hours. The third strain, septicemic plague, infected the bloodstream and killed all of its victims. No matter which form, plague resulted in a horrible and agonizing death.

The disease caused spots on the skin that are red at first and then turn black. By August 1348, the plague had spread as far north as England, where people called it “The Black Death” because of the black spots it produced on the skin.

History of the Plague

The expanded trading networks during the 14th century allowed the plague to spread so quickly across Asia, Europe, and North Africa. But even when the Black Death played itself out in 1351, the plague was not finished. It continued to strike the world in a series of waves, revisiting Europe into the 18th century and Asia and Africa into the 20th century. In winter the disease seemed to disappear, but only because fleas—which were now helping to carry it from person to person—are dormant then. Each spring, the plague attacked again, killing new victims.



Response to the Plague

In Europe: The plague has stunned Europe, and everywhere people are desperate for an explanation. Some blame invisible particles carried in the wind, others talk of poisoned wells. Many inevitably, blame the Jews. Immediate responses differ widely. Some chose to challenge the plague by bouts of riotous living; others sought protection by barring their doors and living as recluses. Neither method has halted the disease. Others left home, seeking safety in the remote countryside, but often they too fall ill. Attempts to bar villages, towns, even whole cities, to sufferers had all failed. The plague moved on.

The outbreak has shattered communities. Families had been set against each other- the well rejecting the sick. Essential services have collapsed; law and order, with so many administrators struck down, barely exists in some areas. A sense of panic pervades Europe and everyone, it appears, is struggling only for his own survival. Properties stand empty, deserted by desperate owners; the sick die alone, for even the most devoted doctors cannot save them: corpses are simply dumped in the street or buried in mass graves. Some depraved creatures, themselves already infected, break into houses and threaten to contaminate all within unless bribed to leave. Agriculture is at a standstill. Crops wither in the fields; cattle wander untended.

Doctors do what they can, but the plague seems irresistible. Even the most expert physicians can do little more than help strengthen people's resolve and build morale. Some recommend the burning of aromatic woods and herbs; others suggest special diets, courses of bleeding, new postures for sleeping and many other remedies. The very rich are trying medicines made of gold and pearls. The terrible truth is that nothing seems to work. Flight is the best option, and if one cannot fly, then all that remains is resignation and prayer.

Bands of hooded men, wearing white robes marked front and back with a red cross, are moving to and fro across Europe, attempting to atone for the ravages of the Black Death by whipping themselves in ritual public ceremonies. The Flagellant Brahren, as they were known, believed that the plague is a punishment for human sin, and that by scourging themselves they can show mankind's repentance. They travelled in parties of anything from 50 to 500 men, and are highly organized. They moved from town to town to perform their rituals. Singing hymns and sobbing, the men beat themselves with scourges studded with iron spikes. Blood gushed from their many wounds, and the spikes embed themselves in the torn flesh. The ritual was performed in public twice each day.



In the Middle East: The dominant Muslim view was that the plague was a mercy from God and martyrdom for the faithful Muslim. They felt that a Muslim should not enter nor flee from a plague-stricken land, and there was no contagion of plague since disease came directly from God.

Both deaths by plague and by battle are considered martyrdom for the Islamic faith. Also, both are equal in God's favor and the believer is assured of reaching paradise.

In general, the Muslims did not declare that plague was God's punishment, they did not encourage flight, and they did not support a belief in the contagious nature of plague—all of which were prevalent in Christian Europe.

Yet, just as the Europeans did not agree on one explanation for the plague, the Muslims also had various opinions on the reason for the disease. As a result, some of them will also react in a similar fashion to the Europeans. Some Muslims will flee from a plague-stricken community even though they were prohibited from fleeing.

The Muslim reaction to the Black Death was characterized by organized communal supplication that included processions through the cities and mass funerals in the mosques. During this period they increasingly emphasized personal piety and ritual purity, which include religious rites and services for the dead.

Sources:

The DBQ Project

www.themiddleages.net/plague.html

<http://web.stanford.edu/class/history13/Readings/MichaelDol.htm>