

The Black Death

In 1348, a plague or disease hit Western Europe. Rats with infected fleas traveling along trade routes brought the disease from Asia to Western Europe. Officially known as the bubonic plague, people called it the “Black Death” because infected people developed black spots on their skin. In the 1300s, fleas on sick rats spread the disease from one person to the next. Between 1348 and 1400, millions of people died. England alone lost nearly one-third of its population to the dreaded disease. By the time the epidemic played out three years later, anywhere between 25% and 50% of Europe's population had fallen victim to the pestilence or disease.

The plague presented itself in three forms. The bubonic type was the most common form of the disease. It led to swellings or buboes that appeared on a victim's neck, armpits or groin. These tumors could range in size from that of an egg to that of an apple. Although some survived



the painful ordeal, most died within a week. Infected fleas that attached themselves to rats and then to humans spread this bubonic type of the plague. A second form of the disease attacked the respiratory system and was spread by merely breathing the exhaled air of a victim. It was much more dangerous than the bubonic type- life expectancy was measured in one or two days. Finally, the septicemic version of

The Plague's Progress the disease attacked the blood system.

Questions:

1: What was the bubonic plague or “Black Death”?

2: How did the disease enter Western Europe?

3: Describe the impact of the disease on the infected person.

A Primary Source on the “Black Death”:

The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague as it ravaged the city of Florence in 1348. The experience inspired him to write The Decameron, a story of seven men and three women who escape the disease by fleeing to a villa outside the city. In his introduction to the fictional portion of his book, Boccaccio gives a graphic description of the effects of the epidemic on his city.

"The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumours. In a short space of time these tumours spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumour had been and still remained.

"No doctor's advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease, An enormous number of ignorant men and women set up as doctors in addition to those who were trained. Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of the tumours described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

"The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching. "

Today, we live in a world with modern science. But during the years of the Black Death, modern science did not exist. Using the primary source, can you find evidence of how this lack of modern science negatively affected the people of Western Europe during the period of the Black Death?

More from Boccaccio:

"One citizen avoided another, hardly any neighbour troubled about others, relatives never or hardly ever visited each other. Moreover, such terror was struck into the hearts of men and women by this calamity, that brother abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children, as if they had not been theirs.

“Thus, a multitude of sick men and women were left without any care, except from the charity of friends (but these were few), or the greed, of servants, though not many of these could be had even for high wages, Moreover, most of them were coarse-minded men and women, who did little more than bring the sick what they asked for or watch over them when they were dying. And very often these servants lost their lives and their earnings.”

Questions:

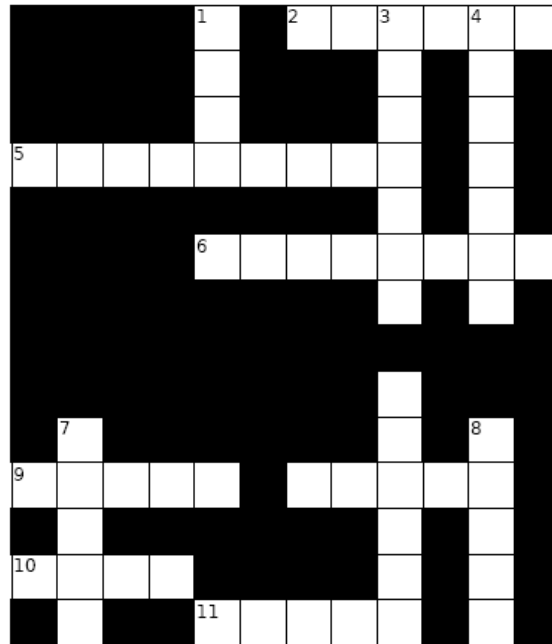
1: How did family members frequently treat one another during the time period of the Black Death?

2: Why did family members act this way?

3: What did the author find most shocking? Explain your answer.

4: What happened to the infected people?

5: Do you think this type of behavior could occur today? Explain your answer.



- | Across | | Down | |
|--------|--|------|--|
| 2 | The swellings that infected people developed | 1 | The continent of origin of the disease |
| 5 | The Italian writer that described the effects of the disease on families | 3 | The official name of the disease that entered Western Europe in 1348 |
| 6 | The number of people who died from the disease | 4 | The nation that lost nearly one-third of its population to the disease |
| 9 | The common name of the disease that entered Western Europe in 1348 | 7 | The insects that spread the plague |
| 10 | The animals that carried the infected insects | 8 | The number of years the plague greatly impacted Western Europe |
| 11 | The reason the disease entered Western Europe | | |

Word Bank:

Fleas, Rats, Millions, Black Death, Trade, Bubonic Plague, Boccaccio, Buboes, England, Asia, Three

"It was dark before I could get home, and so land at Churchyard stairs, where to my great trouble I met a dead corps of the plague in the narrow ally just bringing down a little pair of stairs."

-S. Pepys