

The Effects of the Black Death

The Black Death greatly affected the people and societies of Western Europe. It also marked a dividing line between the central Middle Ages, with medieval culture at its greatest strength, and the later Middle Ages with its chronically reduced population. Fewer people were left to work, pay taxes, and even pay their debts. In fact, not only had the debtor died, his whole family had died with him as well as many of his kinsmen. There was simply no one to collect from.

Construction projects stopped for a time or were abandoned altogether. Guilds or craft unions lost their craftsmen and could not replace them. Mills and other special machinery might break and the one man in town who had the skill to repair it had died in the plague. There were towns advertising for specialists, offering high wages.

The labor shortage was very severe, especially in the short term, and consequently, wages rose. Because of the mortality, there was an oversupply of goods, and so prices dropped. Between the two trends, the standard of living rose . . . for those still living. Effects in the countryside were just as severe. Farms and entire villages died out or were abandoned as the few survivors decided not to stay on. When Norwegian sailors finally visited Greenland again in the early 1400s, they found in the settlements there only wild cattle roaming through deserted villages.

Questions:

1: How did the Black Death affect Western European societies?

2: Why did wages rise?

3: Why did food prices drop?

The Roman Catholic Church was also affected by the Black Death. Many priests died and no one could hear confession. Bishops died, and so did their

successors and even their successors. The loss of life in such great numbers and to such a gruesome a disease, brought despair everywhere. People wondered how God do this. And why could not His servants in the Church avert or mitigate His wrath?

"During this great epidemic of death [in Tuscany] more than eighty died of every hundred, and the air was so infested that death overtook men everywhere, wherever they might flee. And when they saw everybody dying they no longer heeded death and believed that the end of the world was at hand."

The tone in this excerpt finds echoes throughout Europe. There were those indeed who believed this calamity marked the end of the world. Even after the crisis had passed, and the world remained, there were those who wondered why God should have so scourged the world.

Questions:

1- How did the Black Death affect the Roman Catholic Church?

2- Why did people believe that the end of the world was at hand?

3- How did the Black Death affect people's beliefs in God and the Church?

Many people believed that the Black Death was the result of God punishing them for their sins. There were some extremely religious people who believed that they could drive the devil away and wash away their sins. These people were called Flagellants. They would strip naked, and then beat themselves or each other. This, they believed, would relieve them of their sins, and thus prevent them from getting the plague. Overall, Flagellants did little harm, in that they hurt their own bodies by choice. Others were not so lucky. The Jewish people were blamed by many for the Black Death; people

believed they poisoned towns' water supply. For this, the worst massacre of Jews, before Hitler's mass killings, took place in the years 1348 and 1349.

Questions:

1: What did the Flagellants believe?

2: What did the Flagellants do?

3: What happened to Jews during the time period of the Black Death?

4: Why were Jews persecuted during the time period of the Black Death?

Effects of the Black Death on England:

It is impossible to overstate the terrible effects of the Black Death on England. With the population so low, there were not enough workers to work the land. As a result, wages and prices rose. The Ordinances of Labourers (1349) tried to legislate a return to pre-plague wage levels, but the overwhelming shortage of laborers meant that wages continued to rise. Landowners offered extras such as food, drink, and extra benefits to lure laborers. The standard of living for laborers rose accordingly.

The nature of the economy changed to meet the changing social conditions. Land that had once been farmed was now given over to pasturing, which was much less labor-intensive. This helped boost the cloth and woolen industry. Society became more mobile, as peasants moved to accept work where they could command a good wage.

The short term economic prosperity did not last; the underlying feudal structure of society had not changed, and by the mid-15th century standards of living had fallen again. Yet for most levels of English society the Black

Death represented a massive upheaval, one which changed the face of English society in a profound way.

Write Five Conclusions about the Effects of the Black Death on England:

- 1: _____
- 2: _____
- 3: _____
- 4: _____
- 5: _____

Excerpts from Diary of Samuel Pepys

July 26: Sad news of the death of so many, the bell is always going. The sickness is got into our Parish this week.

July 30: It is a sad noise to hear our bell to toll and ring so often, either for deaths or burials.

August 12: The people die so that it now seems that they are willing to carry the dead to be buried by daylight. The nights are not long enough to do it. The Lord Mayor commands people to be inside by nine at night so that the sick may leave their houses for air and exercise.

August 16: To the Exchange, where I have not been for a great while. But, Lord, how sad a sight it is to see the streets empty of people.

August 31: In the city died this week 7,496, and of them 6,102 of the Plague. But it is feared that the true number of the dead this week is near 10,000. Partly because the poor cannot be taken account of and partly because others will not have any bell rung for them.

Write Five Reflections from Samuel Pepys' Diary:

- 1: _____
- 2: _____
- 3: _____
- 4: _____
- 5: _____