

7.8 Why was the Bubonic Plague so Devastating to European Society?

Introduction: This document-based essay is based on documents (1-9). It is designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. Some of the documents have been edited. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and any point of view that may be presented in the document.

Historical Context: The Bubonic Plague or “Black Death” came out of the eastern Mediterranean along shipping routes, reaching Italy in the spring of 1348. By the time the epidemic was abating in 1351, between 25% and 50% of Europe’s population had died. The epidemic is believed to have started in China and made its way west across Asia to the Black Sea. One theory is that it entered Europe when a group of Tartars used catapults to hurl the dead bodies of infected soldiers over the walls of a Genoese trading outpost that was under siege. Because people had no defense against the disease and no understanding of how it spread, it brought panic as well as illness and death. Lepers, as well as Jews and other ethnic and religious minorities, were accused of spreading the plague and thousands of people were burned.

We now know that the disease was spread by infected fleas that attached themselves to rats and human. The most striking symptom of the plague was dark swellings or “buboes” in the lymph glands on a victim’s neck, armpits and groin. They ranged in size from an egg to an apple. Once the swelling appeared, an infected person was usually dead within a week. Another even more virulent form attacked the respiratory system and was spread by breathing the exhaled air of a victim. Once a person was infected, their life expectancy was one or two days. One of the most striking descriptions of the plague is in the introduction to *The Decameron*. The book was written by Giovanni Boccaccio of Florence. It tells the story of seven men and three women who flee to a villa outside the city where they are able to survive (Source: EyeWitnessstoHistory.com).

Task: Using information from the documents and your knowledge of global history, answer the questions that follow each document in Part A.

Your answers to the questions will help you write the Part B essay, in which you will be asked to:

- Describe the spread of the Bubonic Plague through Europe.
- Identify the symptoms of people infected with the plague.
- Describe the reactions of people to the plague and explain why some people were blamed.
- Explain why, in your opinion, the Bubonic Plague was so devastating to European society.

Note: Be sure to use specific evidence cited in the documents as well as outside knowledge about Global history.

1. The Bubonic Plague spreads through Europe



- Where and when does the Bubonic Plague first enter Europe?
- How long does it take before the Bubonic Plague is recorded in Messina in Italy? In London in England?
- What is the last region of Europe affected by the Bubonic Plague?
- In your opinion, why does the spread of the plague follow this route?

2. Boccaccio Describes the Arrival of the Bubonic Plague in Florence

Source: *The Decameron* (adapted from a translation by Richard Hooker)

In 1348, there came into the noble city of Florence, the most beautiful of all Italian cities, a deadly pestilence, which, . . . several years earlier had originated in the Orient, where it destroyed countless lives, scarcely resting in one place before it moved to the next, and turning westward its strength grew monstrously. No human wisdom or foresight had any value: enormous amounts of refuse and manure were removed from the city by appointed officials, the sick were barred from entering the city, and many instructions were given to preserve health; just as useless were the humble supplications to God given not one time but many times in appointed processions, and all the other ways devout people called on God.

At the beginning of the spring of that year, that horrible plague began with its dolorous [misery causing] effects in a most awe-inspiring manner. . . [I]t began with swellings in the groin and armpit, in both men and women, some of which were as big as apples and some of which were shaped like eggs, some were small and others were large; the common people called these swellings *gavoccioli*. From these two parts of the body, the fatal *gavaccioli* would begin to spread and within a short while would appear over the entire body in various spots; the disease at this point began to take on the qualities of a deadly sickness, and the body would be covered with dark and livid spots, which would appear in great numbers on the arms, the thighs, and other parts of the body; some were large and widely spaced while some were small and bunched together. And just like the *gavaccioli* earlier, these were certain indications of coming death.

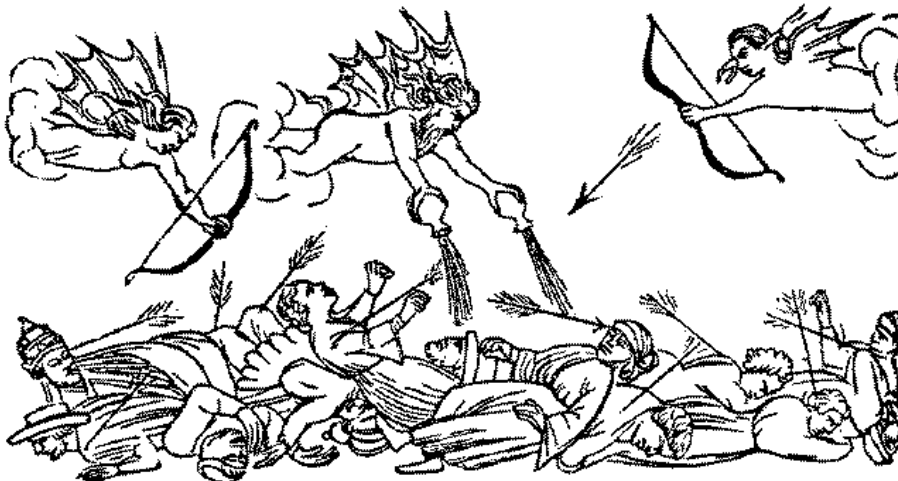
To cure these infirmities neither the advice of physicians nor the power of medicine appeared to have any value or profit; perhaps either the nature of the disease did not allow for any cure or the ignorance of the physicians . . . did not know how to cure it; as a consequence, very few were ever cured; all died three days after the appearance of the first outward signs, some lasted a little bit longer, some died a little bit more quickly, and some without fever or other symptoms.

1. What is the source of this passage?
2. According to the author, where did the plague originate?
3. What are the symptoms of people who are ill with the plague?
4. According to the author, why is this plague so difficult to treat?

3. An Image of Plague by Giovanni Sercambi. Source: <http://www.angelfire.com/sc/plauge/>

Giovanni Sercambi (1348-1424) was an apothecary [pharmacist] in a town about forty miles west of Florence. This image of the Black Plague was created about 1400. Arrows were a typical image for plague since they seem to bypass some and strike others. The Angel of Death represents the general miasma that seemed typical of the plague.

1. Why are arrows used as a symbol for the plague?
2. According to this picture, what is the cause of the Bubonic Plague?



4. Marchione di Coppo Stefani, The Florentine Chronicle (c. 1370)

Source: Adapted from Stefani, Marchione di Coppo. *Cronaca fiorentina. Rerum Italicarum Scriptores, Vol. 30.* , ed. Niccolo Rodolico. Citta di Castello: 1903-13.

Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted vast sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. They inspected the urine from a distance and with something odoriferous [to block the smell] under their nose. Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial. And those who died had neither confessor nor other sacraments. And many died with no one looking after them. . . . At every church, or at most of them, they dug deep trenches, down to the waterline, wide and deep, depending on how large the parish was. And those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch, or else they paid a high price to those who would do it for them. The next morning, if there were many [bodies] in the trench, they covered them over with dirt. And then more bodies were put on top of them, with a little more dirt over those; they put layer on layer just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna.

1. What happened to people when they became sick with Bubonic plague?
2. Why was it so difficult to take care of the dead?

5. A Nursery Rhyme

Many victims of the plague were children, who were unable to take care of themselves even if they survived infection. This common nursery rhyme describes the Bubonic Plague.

Ring a-round the rosy
 Pocket full of posies
 Ashes, ashes!
 We all fall down!

“Ring a-round the rosy” probably refers to rosary beads which are supposed to provide God’s help. Posies are flowers that were used to stop the odor of rotting bodies. Ashes refers to cremation of bodies. “We all fall down” is the final outcome of the plague.

1. What do we learn about the plague from this nursery rhyme?
2. In your opinion, why did children sing this nursery rhyme?

6. Images of the Plague

Sources: <http://history.smsu.edu/jchuchiak/Plague%20Victim.gif>; http://www.hhmi.org/biointeractive/museum/exhibit99/a_2.html



1. In your opinion, who are the three figures in this drawing? Explain.

Medieval physicians wore outfits made of cloth or leather to protect themselves from the plague. The bird-like beak contained spices and vinegar-soaked cloth to mask the stench of death and decay.



2. Why did doctors wear costumes such as this one?
3. In your opinion, why would the costume make them look like birds?

7. The Cremation of Jews in Strasbourg, Germany on St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349

Source: Adapted from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.html>

Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it [the plague] through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells . . . and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there. Nevertheless they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen [Switzerland] who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells. Thereupon they burnt the Jews in many towns. . . . On Saturday - that was St. Valentine's Day - they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans some gave their share to the Cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.

1. What happened to many European Jews during the Bubonic Plague?
2. Why were some Jews spared?
3. According to the author, why were the Jews really blamed for the plague?

DOCUMENT 8. Black Death: How Many Died? Source: http://www.hyw.com/books/history/Black_De.htm

Area	Pre-Plague Population	Post-Plague Population	Population Decline
England/Wales	3.7 Million	2.5 Million	32%
Scotland	500,000	400,000	20%
Ireland	800,000	600,000	25%
France	13 million	8.2 million	37%
Belgium/Luxembourg	2 million	800,000	33%
Holy Roman Empire	17 million	12.5 million	26%
Spain	7 million	5 million	29%
Italy	10 million	7 million	30%
Total (selected areas)	53.2 million	37 million	30%

1. What was the population of England and Wales before and after the Bubonic Plague?
2. According to this chart, which country had the most casualties?
3. According to this chart, which country had the greatest mortality (death) rate?

DOCUMENT 9. Estimated Long-term Impact on Population of Europe (A.D. 1000 - 1600)

http://www.hyw.com/books/history/Black_De.htm

Year	Population in Millions	Year	Population in Millions
1000	36	1300	79
1050	40	1345	83
1100	44	1400	60
1150	51	1450	71
1200	58	1500	81
1250	68		

1. What was the population of Europe in 1345? In 1400? In 1500?
2. Based on this chart, what was the long-term impact of the Bubonic Plague on Europe?