

THE BLACK DEATH

In the fourteenth century, Europe was devastated by a series of outbreaks of the Plague or 'Black Death'. It has been estimated that in some places between 25 to 50% of the population died. The plague had many effects on social life and on the Church.

HOW THE PLAGUE WAS SPREAD

The viral infection that caused the Plague was carried by the fleas on rats; there was no known cure. Sanitary conditions in the Middle Ages were appalling. Waste and sewerage disposal were almost nonexistent and personal cleanliness was very basic. It was not unusual for people never to have a full bath in their life time or not to bathe for the duration of winter.

This was not the case in Roman times when most wealthy households had bathrooms and each city had public baths. In large cities like Rome or other provincial centres, there were many public baths. Social historians note that by the 13th century there were hardly any public baths still in existence. Can you give any reasons why this had happened?

Human waste and food refuse were generally tipped into the streets.

Added to this, there was overcrowding in the cities, with houses built up against each other in narrow streets with little sunshine. In such conditions the Plague spread with devastating speed. There was no way to contain it.

Some historians have suggested that the spread of the Plague might have been lessened if cats had not systematically killed in the previous decades. The cat had been identified as an evil animal, associated with witches and witchcraft. Witches were believed to keep cats which they could change into various apparitions (ghost-like forms). As witches were thought to be the cause of many of the bad things that happened to people in those times, it is understandable to see why cats were feared and killed.

In the countryside, people were not at such risk from the Plague, but people running away from the infected cities spread the disease to the country as well.

The rapid spread of the Plague caused panic wherever it broke out. People frantically searched for causes and cures. In its wake there were outbreaks of lawlessness and debauchery. A kind of insanity took many people who felt there was no way to escape death. Others turned to religion as the only way to save themselves if not on earth, then at least in heaven.

This gloomy era and the way people reacted to it

The extent and horror of the Black Death are hard for us to imagine. The following is an eye-witness account by Jean le Bel, Canon of Liege, in France. This is an extract from his chronicle:

There was current at this time a common and general mortality, throughout the world, from a sickness which was called the Plague, which took some on the left arm and others in the groin. They died within three days, and when it struck a street or a lodging, one caught it from another, which is why few people dared to help or visit the sick. Nor could they make confessions, for it was almost impossible to find a priest who would hear them, nor did they dare to clothe or touch the sick . . .

People could not think what to make of the affliction or what remedy to offer for it, but many believed that this was a miracle and divine vengeance on the sins of the world. Hence it came about that some began to do great penance in diverse ways by way of devotion.

Among others, the people of Germany began to go through the country on the main roads in companies carrying crucifixes, standards and great banners, as in procession; they went through the streets, two by two, singing loudly hymns to God and our Lady, rhymed and with music; then they assembled together and stripped to their chemises twice a day and beat themselves as hard as they could with knotted lashes embedded with needles, so that the blood

flowed down from their shoulders on all sides, while all the time they were singing their songs. Then they threw themselves to the earth three times in devotion and went about among one another with great humility.

When people saw that this mortality and pestilence did not cease as a result of the penitence that they did, a rumour was heard that this mortality came from the Jews and that the Jews had thrown poison into wells and fountains throughout the world to poison all Christianity, so as to have lordship and control over all the world. Therefore everyone, great and small, was so aroused against them that they were all burned and put to death in the market places where the flagellants went, by the lords and justices of those places. And they [the Jews] went to their deaths dancing and singing as joyfully as if they were going to a wedding. They did not want to become Christians nor would they allow their children to receive baptism . . . They said that they had found in the books of their prophets that when this sect of flagellants ran through the world all Jewry would be destroyed by fire, and the souls of those who died joyously in their firm faith would go to paradise.⁸

give us an insight into how medieval people thought and how they coped with a critical time in their lives. Like people in every century, including our own, medieval people tried to find reasons for catastrophes.

WHAT MEDIEVAL PEOPLE BELIEVED TO BE THE CAUSES OF THE PLAGUE

Some believed the illness was sent by God as a warning and a punishment because people were not

obeying God's laws. They blamed those who got drunk, gambled, and who indulged in immoral behaviour.

Some believed that The Angel of Death visited each town at night and chose who was to die. The Angel would knock on the door with a spear and each knock meant that one person would die.

Some believed that the Black Death was caused by the Jews. It was believed by many that Jews



The Black Death. A miniature of the people of Tournai burying victims of the epidemic.

poisoned water supplies. In Strasbourg, under torture, a Jewish doctor was said to have given the names of 2,000 Jews who had supposedly conspired to contaminate the town's water supply. Although there was no evidence, all these Jews were burned to death.

There were also numerous 'scientific' explanations about how the Plague originated: from bad air and mists coming from boiling seas in unknown distant lands to strange happenings among the stars and planets.

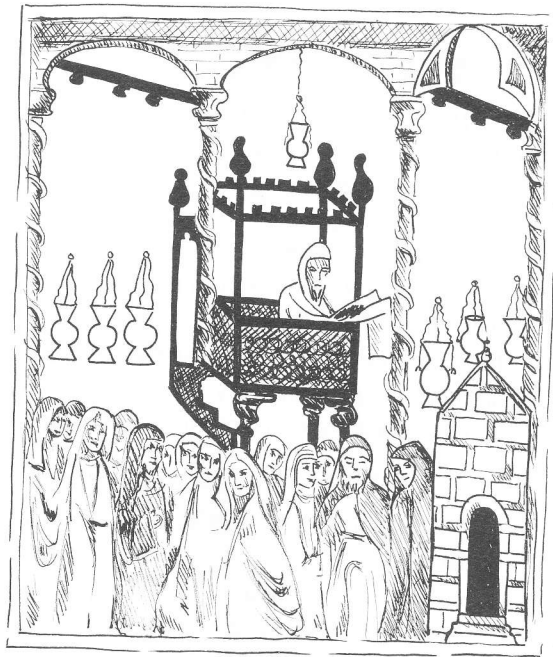
CURES FOR THE PLAGUE

There were as many 'cures' for the Plague as there were causes. It was believed that writing out certain prayers each day and then eating the paper they were written on would prevent the disease.

Doctors advocated the burning of incense and the drinking of exotic potions, mixtures of herbs and bits and pieces of animals, like old snake skin.

One French physician would burn out the buboes (the large black sores) with a hot poker. It was painful and ineffective.

During one summer when the Plague was at its worst, it was reported that Pope Clement IV, in his



A fourteenth century illustration of a Passover service at a Jewish Synagogue.

During the Middle Ages Jews were frequently restricted by the authorities.



The clothes worn by a 'plague doctor'. The costume was thought to protect the wearer from getting the disease.

residence in Avignon in the south of France, spent the summer sitting between two huge fires - he survived the heat and the Plague!

The Pope did manage to organise medical aid for the city and offered sanctuary to Jews from the Rhineland who were accused of causing the Plague.

THE FLAGELLANTS

In Belgium, the Abbot of St. Martin of Tournai wrote in his diary about seeing a procession of hundreds of men who called themselves the 'Red Knights of Christ'. They believed that if they walked from town to town in single file and beat each other on the bare back until the blood flowed, the Black Death would stop. They were the flagellants, (from the Latin verb 'flagellate' which means 'to beat'). These processions were common in towns all over Europe. Only

when the Plague came to an end in about 1350, did the flagellants disappear.

What do such religious movements tell us about medieval people's understanding of events? The historian, R.W. Southern, explains it in this way:

The behaviour and belief of the flagellants left almost no [impression] on the institution or thinking of the medieval Church but it leaves a vivid impression of the way in which large numbers of people believe when [put under] great strain. They took up the devotions that were [part of their everyday life] and adapted them [in their own way] to make a sacrifice to God both of their own bodies and of those whom they believed to be God's enemies. In their zeal [enthusiasm] they swamped the ordinary organisation of the Church . . . The Plague added an explosive energy to frustrations that were present [among people of the middle ages].⁹

Like other popular religious movements of the Middle Ages which were nearly always heretical (for example, the Albigensian heresy), the flagellants signified the dislike and distrust that the poor, the peasants and town workers felt for a Church that seemed to them to be under the control of a wealthy and powerful religious elite whose way of life was an insult to the ideals of Jesus and his Apostles.

Chronicles and diaries written by people who survived the Black Death give us a vivid picture of one of the most frightening times that people experienced. The following is an extract from the Chronicle of Henry Knighton who was a boy when the Black Death spread throughout England.

In this [1348] and the following year, there was a general death of people throughout the world. It began first in India, then it passed to Tharsis, thence to the Saracens, Christians and Jews in the course of one year, from one Easter to the next . . .

In one day there died 812 people in Avignon according to the reckoning made to the pope

... 358 Dominicans died in Provence in Lent; in Montpellier only seven friars were left from 149 ... At Marseilles only one Franciscan remained of 150 ...

Then the grievous plague came to the seacoasts from Southampton, and came to Bristol, and it was there as if all the strength of the town had died, as if they had been hit with sudden death, for there were few who stayed in their beds more than three days, or two days or even one half a day. Then the death broke out everywhere the sun goes. And more than 380 died in Leicester in the small parish of St Leonard. More than 400 died in the parish of the Holy Cross; 700 died in the parish of St Margaret of Leicester. And so it was in greater number in each parish. Then the bishop of Lincoln sent throughout his diocese and gave general power to each and every priest, regular as well as secular, to hear confessions and absolve with full and complete episcopal

authority, except only in the instance of debt. In which case, if he was able by himself while he lived, he should pay it, or others surely would do this for him from his possessions after his death. Likewise the pope granted full remission of all sins to whoever was absolved while in peril of death, and he granted this power to last from Easter to the next following. And everyone could elect his confessor as it pleased him ...

There was such a lack of servants and helpers that there was no one who knew what he ought to do ... The workers, nevertheless, were so elated and contrary that they did not heed the mandate of the king [prohibiting higher wages] but if anyone wanted to hire them, he had to give them as they desired; either lose their crops and fruit or grant the selfish and lofty wishes of the workers ...

After the aforesaid pestilence, many large and small buildings in all the cities and villages



A group of flagellants

collapsed and were levelled with the earth for lack of inhabitants; likewise many villages and hamlets were deserted. No house was left in them for everyone who had lived in them had died, and it was probable that many such villages were never to be inhabited again.

DECLINE OF THE PLAGUE

By 1350, the Plague had subsided in most parts of Europe. There were further outbreaks in England and France from 1361-1400. In the seventeenth century, it returned in some parts of Europe but it did not kill anywhere near the same number of people as it did in the years 1347-50.

One of the reasons the Plague never again reached epidemic proportions was that sanitary conditions steadily improved. Also, vicious brown rats from the Volga regions of Russia migrated across Europe and displaced the black rats whose fleas were carriers of the Plague. Thus the main sources of infection were largely eliminated.

RESULTS OF THE PLAGUE

The results of the Black Death were profound. In a sense it changed the whole fabric of medieval life. Fear and guilt were to cast a shadow over religious attitudes and ideas. Because of the large number of deaths in monasteries, the entire monastic system which was so vital to the spiritual life of the Church was severely weakened. In order to make up the much needed numbers in the Church, unsuitable and uneducated people were accepted into religious communities. This was to have serious effects on the Church and society in later years.

Did you Know that:

The nursery rhyme 'Ring-a-ring-a-rosy' was written about the Plague?

'Ring-a-ring-a-rosy' describes the round red marks people would get on their bodies before the large black sores of the Plague appeared.

'A pocket full of posies' referred to the herbs and the dried flowers people would carry in pouches or in their pockets in the hope of warding off the plague.

'Atishoo atishoo' referred to the first signs of the Plague – the way the sickness started off.

'We all fall down' – the meaning here is fairly easy to guess.

Every ten years, a small village called Oberammergau, in Upper Bavaria, Germany, puts on a play about the death of Christ. All the inhabitants of the town take part. They do this as a fulfilment of a vow taken by the villagers in 1643 that if they were spared from the Black Death, they would put on the play every ten years for the rest of time.

The Oberammergau Passion Play is now famous and people book years in advance to attend.

Discussion Questions

1. Having read the extract from Henry Knighton's chronicle, what do you think might have been some of the economic consequences of such a catastrophe?
2. What social class do you think Henry Knighton belonged to? What evidence can you find in the passage to support your opinion?
3. Do you think people today still look to blame someone or something for disasters or outbreaks of disease that occur?
4. What do you think would be the effect on monasteries and nunneries of so many deaths caused by the Plague?
5. What effects do you think the Plague would have had on family life?

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6. What effects would the Plague have had on individual people's ideas about life?

7. Do you think the relationship between the upper class and the other classes might have been affected because of the Plague?

