

Effects of the Black Death

Name: _____

You will read several excerpts. For each, answer the questions that follow.

Excerpt	Questions
<p>China: The Black Death originated in China—as did all 3 waves of <i>Yersinia Pestis</i>. We believe it began in the early 1330s or possibly late 1320s. At the time, China was in the middle of the Yuan dynasty collapsing and the record keeping was quite poor. However, we know that China was struck by multiple natural disasters. The plague, some major floods, and widespread famine brought upon by the start of the Little Ice Age. All of this made record keeping difficult and also muddled death figures but we think about 25-30% of China’s population was killed by the plague.</p>	<p>What factors made it difficult to track the effect of the plague in China?</p>
<p>Middle East: The Black Death struck the Middle East extremely hard. In Persia, it depopulated the region and made it easy for Tamerlane—who imagined himself a second Genghis Khan—to butcher his way across the land, further devastating struggling countries. In Egypt, it resulted not only in the deaths of about 50% of the population, it also saw a lapse in the complex irrigation system, setting farming back for at least 2 centuries—which led directly to the decline of the Mamluk Sultanate.</p>	<p>What additional factors worsened the effects of the plague in the Middle East?</p>
<p>Middle East: places like Europe saw a number of weirdly beneficial results from the Black Death. This is not true of the Middle East. The results of the Black Death in the Middle East were consolidation of lands under the Timurid and later Ottoman Empire—both oppressive, conservative states. The Black Death also contributed to a general decline of Middle East economies resulting from the death of the Silk Road in the 16th century. This decline lasted until the 20th century.</p>	<p>What were the general effects of the Black Death in the Middle East?</p>
<p>India: given the interconnectedness of Asia during the Mongol Era, it seems like a given that India would have experienced the Black Death. Additionally, chroniclers in Central Asia and the Middle East stated that India was devastated by the Black Death. However, there are a grand total of zero first-hand accounts of the Black Death in India until the 1600s. Furthermore, it seems as if India’s population actually increased in the 14th century (unlike any other region of Eurasia).</p>	<p>Why is there a controversy about whether the Black Death hit India?</p>

More on back

Effects on Europe

Written Record: the European written record on the Black Death exceeds that of any other part of the world by an enormous amount. For Europe, the Black Death was one of the most important events in history. The disease does not seem to be as significant to other parts of the world. In Europe, the Black Death was treated as the end of the world. Scholars wrote about the futility of fighting it, artists painted death triumphant over life and Hell triumphant over Heaven, and everywhere it made people doubt the church and question God.

How was the Black Death treated by Europeans?

Death Toll: The death toll of the Black Plague is absolutely staggering. Reports are that anywhere from 30-60% of Europe died during the plague. This could be higher locally. Some towns experienced 90-100% death tolls. The main wave of the Black Death was 1346-1353 but the Plague would continue to recur in Europe until the 18th century. Without antibiotics, the disease is extremely deadly. Even the common and less serious Bubonic variety killed more than half of the people that contracted it in most cases. The others are nearly 100% deadly untreated. Worse still, medieval treatments did nothing to stop the plague and only really increased its likeliness of spreading.

Why was the death toll so bad in Europe?

Questioning the Church: for centuries, the Catholic Church had ruled over European culture. Their claim was that the Pope spoke for God and that anything the Pope decreed was a command from God. When the church proved helpless against the Plague, this became deeply questioned. In the wake of the plague, we see a huge growth of movements that challenge church authority. Both the scientific revolution and protestant reformation have their roots in the Black Death.

Why did the Black Death make people question the church?

Upsetting Feudalism: since the end of Rome, Europe had been operating in the Feudal system—in which local lords and knights rule over peasants who are tied to the land with almost no rights. The Feudal system was inefficient and oppressive and concentrated wealth in the hands of the wealthy. Massive death tolls all but wiped out the Feudal system. Extreme deaths amongst working populations meant no one was around to work the farms. As a result, many knights and lords went bankrupt and Feudalism all but disappeared from Central and Western Europe.

How did the Black Death kill feudalism?

Increasing Wages: weirdly, the farmers who lived through the Black Death saw their lives significantly improved. Huge depopulation saw the value of their labor increase and a peasant in 1400 probably made about 5x what a peasant in 1300 made. Additionally, depopulation also drove down the price of land as so many landholders had perished. This meant that peasants could afford their own land and had enough wealth to spend on things like clothes and new tools. This caused a boom in manufacturing industries. In general, there is a belief that the Black Death was a fundamental stepping stone on the path to the Industrial Revolution.

What improvements did Peasants see in their lives?