

Black Death

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## Black Death

The mid-14<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by one of the most severe plagues known in history. Originating in East Asia, the plague spread across the continents, painfully and swiftly claiming the lives of hundreds of millions of people. The Black Death managed to continue on its mortally disastrous path unabated for years. The consequences brought about by the epidemic were momentous. One of the ramifications emanating from the sustained death and destruction was the unprecedented decrease in Europe's population. Although the large-scale mortality cases are regrettable, the Black Death prompted people to change their approach towards economics and education, reinforced social mobility, and facilitated the rise of free-thinkers.

Before the spread of the Black Death, Medieval Europeans primarily adhered to the tenets of the feudal economic system. According to DeWitte et al. (2017), feudalism, as practiced in Medieval Europe during the Black Death, was based on fiefdom, whereby monarchs maintained absolute control over all land with the direct aid of wealthy men known as lords. Consequently, the population was significantly stratified, and the majority of them being peasants, provided labor to the lords in exchange for food, shelter, and protection (DeWitte et al., 2017). Essentially, feudalism was the abject personification of servitude. After the Plague, the much-needed labor to keep the lords and the monarchs in control dwindled significantly. Consequently, laborers started demanding increased wages, which were to be paid in cash, while labor guilds had to enlist new laborers to replace those claimed by the Plague (DeWitte et al., 2017). The resulting change in economic dynamics facilitated the demise of the feudalistic system.

The increase in wages demanded by the laborers, as well as the uptake of new workers, initiated a period of heightened social mobility. The newly-found mobility

facilitated the development of more individualized systems of work, whereby laborers opted to choose the lands to work on as well as the remuneration that they wanted (McGrath & Martin, 2015). In turn, it led to the diminishing of the traditional holds of feudalism. Furthermore, most peasants began to migrate to the cities, thereby ushering the inflows of new revenue streams. According to McGrath and Martin (2015), the resulting change in the economic dynamics was historically critical as it had played a pivotal role in leading 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe into the Renaissance.

The Black Death also facilitated the implementation of significant changes in the medieval educational system. Before the advent of the Black Death, Latin was the primary language of imparting knowledge in 14th-century Europe and, according to Tuchman (2017), was used primarily by monks. The Church, seen by many as a source of refuge at the time (Tuchman 2017), was directly involved in dealing with those afflicted by the calamitous epidemic. Consequently, most of its monks were infected, and their deaths led to a significant decrease in the Latin-speaking population, resulting in other languages being flourished (Bergs & Burrige, 2017). Moreover, the task of teaching devolved to include teachers drawn from lower schools. Latin professors at the university level were gradually phased out. These changes marked a turning point in the educational system applied in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

The changes in education initiated a radical shift in the field of medicine. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, medicine practice in Europe, as posited by Aberth (2020), was severely underdeveloped. Hospitals, for instance, were perceived as places of taking care of the soul rather than places where sick people would go to get healed (Aberth, 2020). However, the onslaught wrought on people by the Black Plague prompted medical practitioners to take radical steps in revitalizing the practice in Europe. The measures adopted included a return to the practice of dissection and the institution of public health programs (Aberth, 2020).

Although these measures did little in terms of finding a cure for the Black Death, they helped propagate the course of medicine and related practices.

The Black Death was propitious to Europe because it contributed to the rise of more free-thinkers. Up until the period of the Black Death, the Church had the undivided devotion of the peasant masses. The Church, in the bid to reassure followers, declared it a punishment from God (Mee, 2012). When the monks and church leaders succumbed to the Plague, people began to question the logic behind the Church's postulation. According to Mee (2012), this marked the turning point where the Church's hold over the masses was irreparably weakened. The resulting querying of Christian dogmas drove people to seek their own methods of interacting with God (Mee, 2012). For example, the Flagellants, a group that traveled across the continent whipping themselves to atone for their sins, was the very embodiment of the paradigm shift from the organized Church.

Apart from being beneficial to 14<sup>th</sup> century Europeans, the Black Death is relevant today because it highlights the intricacies of pandemics. One of the most prominent of these complexities is the treatment of the affected and infected. In Europe, people afflicted by the Plague were shunned. While this is understandable, the repercussions, such as sustained persecution of Jews driven by misinformation, were disastrous. (Finley & Koyama, 2018). Comparable experiences have been reported in places stricken by pandemics even today. According to Snowden (2019), minority groups are often persecuted whenever such instances arise, as witnessed during the Western African Ebola epidemic. The fact that such cases are still prevalent today necessitate the prioritization of better measures and methodologies to alleviate and control the propensity of similar occurrences. Moreover, the Black Death serves as a constant reminder of the consequences of pandemics, hence supporting further development in the field of medicine today.

The Black Death was a catastrophic pandemic that ranged across Europe during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Black Death caused hundreds of millions in fatalities, it also contributed to the onset of several beneficial changes. These changes included a radical shift in the educational system, advances in the field of medicine, and facilitated the adoption of free-thinking rationale in Europe. The Black Death remains relevant today by providing the basis for the advancements in methods of containing and eradicating pandemics, as well as promoting rigorous studies in the practice of medicine and other related technologies.

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