

### Background information

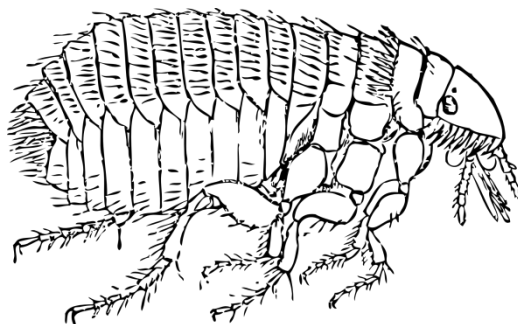
The Black Death swept through Europe in the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, notably between 1347 and 1349. It killed untold numbers of people – some estimates place deaths as high as one third of Europe's total population. Yet not all of the effects were negative. Great changes were prompted by the Black Death – human, social, political, and economic.

### Your tasks

1. On your table (p.2), write down all of the effects of the Black Death that you can remember from previous lessons.
2. Now check your notes from last lesson, can you add anything else?
3. You now have three minutes to walk around the room and check your classmates' work. Can you learn anything new from their ideas?
4. Now look at the information in the coloured boxes (p.3). Can you add anything new to your table?
5. Consider the following factors: human, economic, political, social. Use four colours to categorise the information on your table into these factors.
6. You should now have enough information to start a debate. First, using the sheet (p.4) write down one sentence to sum up your opinion about this statement:

***'On balance, the Black Death was a good thing for Europe'.***

7. You are now going to take part in a silent debate:
  - Walk around the room and read other people's reactions to the debate statement.
  - Add notes, opinions and challenges to everyone else's reactions.
  - Justify whatever you write – 'I agree' is not enough.
  - When you have written on someone else's sheet, put your initials by your writing. This helps track the spread of the debate.
8. Has your opinion changed through the silent debate? Write a paragraph explaining your opinion about the statement: 'On balance, the Black Death was a good thing for Europe'.



## Silent debate: What was the impact of the Black Death?

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Symptoms (effects on victims)	Effects on society (social and economic)
Effects on power structures (feudal system and the Church)	Effects on the survivors

The Black Death can actually be thanked for the introduction of perfume to Britain! Before the Black Death there is little recorded evidence of people doing anything to make themselves, or their homes, smell nicer. Once they got used to burning herbs (especially Pomander) to 'ward off the Black Death', they continued to do so after the end of the outbreak.

The Black Death arguably made the general population stronger and healthier. Those who were strong enough to survive passed favourable genes onto the next generation. This is called natural selection.

The general failure of doctors to cure, and scientists to explain, the Black Death prompted a renewed focus on experimentation and research. After the Black Death, medical progress began to increase far more than it had in the three centuries before.

People also saw that families who kept cleaner houses were less likely to have caught the plague, especially ones where the refuse, food waste, and human waste were kept away from the house. This prompted an improvement in building hygiene and cleanliness.

There was a great increase in both general literacy and the number of universities in England after the Black Death. There are several theories as to why, but we cannot totally explain it. One argument is that most of the monks who were literate had died, and so people had to learn to read and write for themselves.

People noticed that families living in stone houses, or at least very well-built wooden ones, tended to catch the plague less. (This was because rats were less able to get into well-built and looked-after homes). This led to an improvement in the general standard of medieval building.

The Black Death prompted the decline of the feudal system – the medieval system of hierarchy whereby a peasant was almost completely worthless and under the command of the local lord. Trust in the nobility was fading and peasants started to stand up for themselves (largely thanks to greater economic worth).

The economic prospects of peasants greatly increased, as there was a sudden shortage of manual labourers, and the nobility had to start paying a fair price for things. This led to a growing 'middle class' whereby skilled workers and craftsmen were able to make a living out of making and selling goods. This greatly boosted the wellbeing of a large part of the population, and improved the economy.

The Church had been the single most powerful institution in medieval Europe (or 'Christendom'). After the Black Death, this began to change. People had less faith in the Church, which had been highly unsuccessful in helping plague victims, and who had actually blamed normal people for causing the Black Death through sin. This decrease in authority in the Church led to more democracy, freedom of speech, and sharing of power in Europe.

The human cost of the Black Death was absolutely enormous. Up to a third of Europe's population and half of London's population were killed. Families were left without mothers, fathers, or children. The disease struck all types of people equally – strong adults just as often as young children. The psychological effects of this were arguably enormous, leaving an entire continent in shock and mourning.

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