

Background information

The Black Death consisted of three types of plague: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic. Its spread across Europe in the mid-14th century, mainly between 1347 and 1349, left death and devastation in its wake. The effects were not all negative, however, and once the worst of the effects passed, the Black Death arguably prompted a regeneration of medieval society.

Key historical term: The 'provenance' of a source

The 'provenance' of a source is its nature, origin, and purpose.

Nature: What is it? (e.g. a newspaper article, textbook, picture, diary entry etc.)

Origin: Who wrote/drew it and when? (e.g. a French baker in 1354)

Purpose: Why was it produced? (e.g. to teach students about the American Civil War)

Tasks

1. Read the background information. Highlight or annotate the key terms and dates in this information.
2. Read the sources and the questions on the next three pages. You must use information in the sources to determine whether each statement in the table on p.4 is true or false.
 - If the statement is true, provide evidence from at least one source to prove it.
 - If the statement is false, provide evidence from at least one source to disprove it.
3. Answer questions 3 and 4 on p.4. These require you to bring together evidence from across several sources and reach a judgement. You should quote from sources whilst answering these questions, in order to back up your point.
4. Challenge: Which of the sources are reliable?
 - Give each source a score out of 10 for reliability. You should refer the **provenance** of the sources whilst you make these judgements of reliability.
 - When you are done explain each score that you have given.

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Source A

'This plague confounds me. Whatever I try, the pestilence resists. I have tried the scientific and the supernatural - both treatment and superstition. My patients are dying, and I cannot save them.'

A doctor's report into his attempts to treat the Black Death in Cardiff, in 1349

Source B

'I am beside myself with worry, but Doctor Ennis assures me that his treatments will work. I have never seen a treatment like it - he took the largest frog I ever have seen, and placed it upon my husband's naked chest. Every time the frog tried to move, the doctor placed it upon a different boil. Goodness me, it was a strange sight for mine eyes.'

The diary of a woman, whose husband caught the Black Death, 1348

Source C

'Dearest Mother and Father. I am pleased to inform you that I have thus far remained unaffected by the pestilence that is sweeping the country. Sadly, my good friend Timothy seems to have succumbed - I witnessed him collapse yesterday, sweating and breathing heavily. His skin had started to mottle, and I believe I even saw the end of a large swelling protruding from beneath his over shirt. I have heard that the recovery rate is slight, but I pray for him nonetheless ... '

A letter from a student at Cambridge University to his family in London, from 1349

Source D

An artist's representation of the Black Death. Victims can be seen dying with buboes on their skin, surrounded by failed attempts to treat them



Source E

'The symptoms of the Black Death were many and varied depending upon the strain of plague the victim had been infected with. The bubonic plague was extremely painful, and would leave large black swellings, called buboes, around the groin and armpits. The bubonic plague killed around 50% of its victims.

The pneumonic plague was more fatal, killing around 90% of all victims. This would infect the lungs, attacking them and causing the lungs to flood, drowning the victim in blood.

The septicaemic plague was the most deadly, killing nearly 100% of all victims. This was a mass infection of the blood, leading to great fevers and internal poisoning. Victims would cough up blood for around one day, before dying painfully.'

An extract from a historical textbook on the Black Death, written in 2011

Source F

'The Black Death killed a huge amount of people, some estimates put the number at around a third of Europe's population, and this caused great social changes in Europe. For one thing, the feudal system, which had relied upon large numbers of poor peasants to provide free labour, started to collapse. As peasants and labourers were in short supply, they could demand wages for their work, and this undermined the strict hierarchy that the Lords and Barons had relied upon.'

From an exhibit in a historical museum in York, created in 2016

Source G

'These protests can go on no longer. Village priests must re-assert their authority, and villagers must be brought back into the Church and they must pay the Tithe. Without this, the land will become godforsaken, and we risk calling down another blight from heaven.'

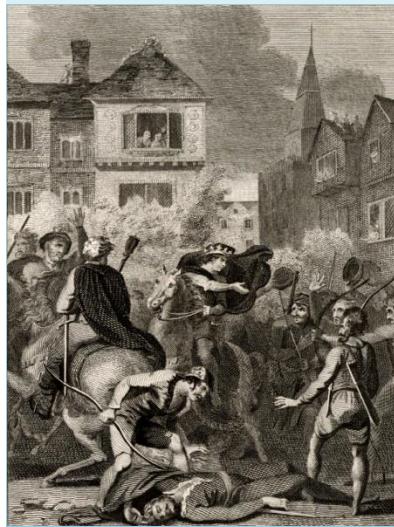
They claim that the Church abandoned the people in a time of need. Untrue! It was they who abandoned the teachings of Christ, and who therefore called down that plague upon us. The people must be reprimanded, and our authority reasserted.

A letter from the Pope to the Archbishop of Oxford, in 1367

Source H

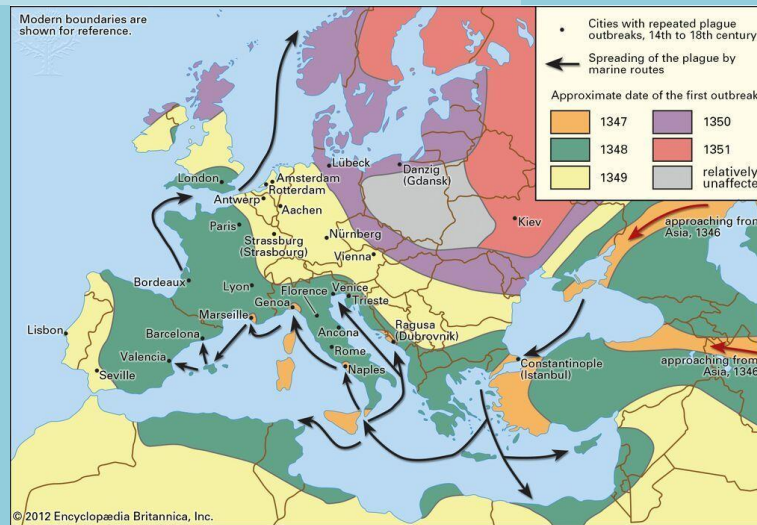
'Thankfully the dreaded blight has passed, and we are getting back to some normality. It's not all exactly the same though - how could it be after so many deaths? For one thing, I've heard rumours that next door aren't going to Church any more. They say if God let such a terrible plague down onto us, why should we love him? What's more, the baker won't pay his taxes to the Baron - he says that the Baron did nothing to help us either. I suppose us peasants have to stick together now.'

A diary entry from a peasant who lived through the Black Death, from 1353



Source I

An artist's representation of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Angry at the Black Death, an empowered workforce rose up against the nobles.



Source J

A map of the spread of the Black Death. Note parts of Eastern Europe, including Warsaw, which were not affected.

1. Symptoms

Use sources A to E to confirm or contradict the following statements.

| Statement | True or false? | Evidence to support (true) or contradict (false) |
|--|----------------|--|
| All of the treatments suggested were logical and scientific. | | |
| All victims of the plague displayed the same symptoms. | | |
| Medieval doctors were extremely effective at treating the Black Death. | | |
| There were very obvious visual signs that someone had the Black Death. | | |

3. Study sources A to E. Which do you think were the worst symptoms and why?

2. Long term effects

Use sources F to J to confirm or contradict the following statements.

| Statement | True or false? | Evidence to support (true) or contradict (false) |
|--|----------------|--|
| The Black Death killed about one in ten people in Europe, evenly across all of Europe. | | |
| The Black Death was a good thing for manual workers. | | |
| The Black Death led to great changes in society, including the feudal system. | | |
| The Black Death only had negative effects. | | |

4. Study all of the sources. Do you think the Black Death was more significant for its deadly symptoms, or its long-term effects? Why?