During the mid-fourteenth century CE, a disease spread across Asia, Europe and regions of Africa. It is estimated 75 million people died.

During this period European knowledge of the world was limited. Overland routes were distant and often dangerous. Sea travel could be just as hazardous, with many ships sticking to coastlines or well-known trade routes. The known world had is boundaries around Europe, northern Africa and parts of Asia.

Eighty to ninety percent of the European population were *‘villeins*’ or *‘yeomen’,* these were the peasants who had to work for a lord who controlled their lives by owning them alongside the land. Yeomen could also be farmers who were free and owned their own land.

Most people lived in the countryside in a village of about 110 – 300 people. Houses were small and in winter time the animals would be brought in to the homes to keep them warm. A smaller percentage of the population lived in towns and cities. London had a population of 80,000, compared to eight million today.

Most castles, towns and villages were very dirty with rubbish, filthy water from the same river that brewers and tanners used and where people dumped their waste and contents of chamber pots. Animals often roamed freely in the streets. Most of the buildings were made of wood and built closely together; ideal conditions for vermin such as rats and mice to thrive in. These living conditions also made it dangerous in case of fire.

During the thirteenth century CE, populations began to move to areas beyond the established farmland and cleared other areas. This led to an increase in food production, leading to an increase in population. By 1300 CE poor weather had led to poorer crop production and later famine.

An unknown disease had spread from China, carried by the Mongol Hordes and followed the trade routes into Europe. Its main carrier was fleas on rats, but some believe a second form could be transmitted from person to person via infectious vapour droplets through coughing.

Urban centres with growing populations and overcrowded living conditions, of both people and rats, led to perfect conditions for a virus to spread.

Incubation of the disease could be anything from 2 – 6 days, followed by the on-set of heavy cold or flu-like symptoms, with a mixture of chills and high temperatures. Welts began to appear on the body and swellings to the size of an orange developed in the lymph glands with a blackening discoloration appearing. Septic shock would then set in and blood pressure would drop. Death would occur in a matter of days.

Doctors and physicians initially believed there was an in balance of the fluids of the body: blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. There were also thoughts that the alignment of the planets may have had an influence and that this may have influenced an unpleasant miasma (noxious vapours).

People during the medieval period believed that the plague was a punishment from God. They believed that turning to God with prayers and pleas would alleviate the destruction of the plague.

The plague was connected to blessings and curses and sin and evil. A person who contracted the disease was therefore ostracised out of the social stigma of clearly being thought of as sinful. Superstition and ignorance largely added to the confusion of the disease and its effects.

The effects of the disease ‘rocked’ the power of the Church, that seemingly held no influence or power in the path of the disease. Priests soon began to refuse to administer the last rights to a deceased person – an essential act to allow one’s soul to enter heaven. Priests became just as fearful of the disease as other people.

The monarchs, nobles and wealthy had the ability to flee the larger urban areas and could retreat to isolated country estates. The peasants, farmers and the poor had no such options and had to remain in the associated dwellings and wait for the disease to arrive.

The plague first seemed to arrive in Europe in 1347 and then spread quickly along trade routes from town to town and via ships from port to port. By 1352, all of Europe had felt the effects of the disease. On average, between a third and half of all those who came into contact with the disease became infected and perished.

Mass grave sites became common place as laws changed out of necessity concerning the burying of the dead. Looting of unoccupied households became a regular occurrence. Some tried hard to isolate themselves from others. Often the sick were left unattended.

Some people believed that firs and sweet smells could ward off the disease. Others felt that the most severe self-punishment such as whipping oneself was the only way to atone for their sins. A social trend of the flagellants became a hysteric movement.

These flagellants became a challenge to the Pope’s controlling power. As their numbers rose they took on an autonomous (independent) role, separate from the Church. Their piety (belief in their own religious importance) led to behaviour above the law and criminal acts began to associate with some flagellant groups, eventually forcing the Church to use soldiers against them.

Jews, who had been a common scapegoat in history (a minority to blame) became easy targets to off-load anger onto. This had the added effect of conveniently absolving (taking away blame) Christians of any wrong doing from Christians and accusing ‘others’.  
  
The lasting impact of the disease left ‘cracks’ in the power of religion over society. There began an emergence of newer ways of looking at religion.

There was a significant effect on the practice of medicine, with views becoming more of a practical nature.

With less people in communities, famine became much less of a common occurrence. The availability of food also meant that most people had a greater range of foodstuffs in the diet; a range that was previously only available to the rich.

Wages rose for those of the poorer classes because they could demand more reward for their work due to labour shortages, as the wealthy still needed people to work the land for them. Some peasants even became landowners themselves. Likewise, some of the ruling classes had to work their lands themselves.

Labour saving devices were created out of necessity. Examples of this are the printing press. The development of mills is also an example of the need for mechanisation to replace a void when labour was unavailable. The end of the plague era could be argued as the initial beginnings of industrialisation.

Of course, some rulers took the sword to ‘take’ resources, meaning pillaging increased for a period of time after the plagues had past and terror tactics were used to extort (to obtain something by force).