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Special Discussion #2

The Black Death was a combination of diseases that included the Bubonic Plague. It hit Europe in the mid of the fourteenth century and killed off approximately 75 percent of the entire human population. Scientists have agreed that the best explanation for the huge number of deaths during this time is that diseases were spread through infected fleas on black rats.

The way the Bubonic Plague was spread was through the bite of an infected flea or the cough of an infected human. Infected fleas would live on the black rats and would in theory infect the rat. Once the host rat would die from the disease, the infected flea would relocate to the nearest living thing, either another rat or a human. Once the flea was on the human, it would bite the human, infecting them with the bubonic plague. Continuing the cycle, once the human died, the infected flea would find another human to infect. Another way the plague was spread was through the cough of an infected human. With so many easy ways to infect humans, the Black Death became a rapidly diffusing pandemic.

With the source of the Black Death being fleas and rats, it makes people think as towards why there were so many rats to start with. To start, individual hygiene was non-existent during this time. The common person did not bathe daily, nor were they able to wash with clean water, as clean water was hard to come by. Only royalty was able to clean with clean water and bathe regularly. In addition, waste disposal was not a thing yet, so trash and waste would be left outside of homes or just thrown onto the streets. This would attract rats and let the rats prosper.

Rats also prospered because of the lack of predators in their environment. The rats’ biggest predator were cats, and 14th century England had actually killed a majority of the cats. The English church killed the majority of cats because of their religious beliefs of cats being related to the devil. Christians during this time feared and killed so many cats, that rats were able to prosper because of the lack of the felines.

The Black Death would affect the sailors first, as they would be in a closed location for a longer period of time. The sailors were left in a small ship for a duration of time, where the infected fleas could easily spread their disease. In addition, if a single sailor caught the bubonic plague, the entire ship would be susceptible to the disease as they could not just escape. The Black Death would also affect the rural farm workers first because of their proximity to animals that carried the fleas. They were nearest to the origin, or source, of the Black Plague as most animals, not only the Black Rat, carried the infected fleas. After affecting the sailors, or the farmers, the disease would spread to the homeless people in the streets, and then quickly move into the homes of the commoners. This disease rapidly diffused from the sailors, who transported the disease country to country, or from the farmers, who would transport the disease from their produce or animals.

In search for a cause of this pandemic, the European’s, who were widely Christian, blamed the Jews for the pandemic. They came to the conclusion that the Jews were poisoning the wells and killing the Christians through the poisoned water. The way the Christians were able to come to this conclusion was due to how the Jews were less affected by the Black Death. The real reason as towards why the Jews were less affected, was because of their strict hygiene and dietary laws, along with their locations in the ghettos, which were located far away from rats. The Jews were persecuted through massacres and burnings. Europeans would burn Jewish communities and murder the Jews in their homes. After burning the Jews completely alive, they would take the Jews’ possessions and make waste of their bodies.

Another group that was blamed for the Black Death by the Europeans were the common people. The Europeans thought that the Black Death was a punishment from God, and that they were being punished by their own and others’ sins. To ask for God’s forgiveness, people would publicly whip themselves as penance for their sins. People who did such acts were called flagellants. They wanted to show God that they should be forgiven for their sins and wickedness.

The Black Death also brought upon change in social customs and attitudes. In fear of the Black Death being an airborne disease, people would cover their mouths and noses whenever stepping outside. In addition, people would never leave their homes, as they thought that isolation and staying indoors was the key to surviving. In contrast to people’s fear of the Black Death, agricultural workers’ standards of living went up, as Europe was facing a huge crisis in poverty and malnutrition. Additionally, there was a huge change in the social structure of classes. With the rapid deaths of people by the Black Death, social classes were broken as entire families of royalty dissipated and left families without heirs.

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