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The plague and its effect on Europe

No one was exempt from it as it swept in off the shores and into the countryside laying its curse of death and pestilence. Europe prospered readily for about 300 years prior to the beginning of the 1300s, but a series of natural disasters occurred. Poor harvests and famines were common and as the prosperous years came to a close, economies were in recession at the onset of the Black Death. On a whole, Europe would take a step backward.

There have been plagues throughout recorded history, but none were of the magnitude nor had the far reaching effects that the Black Plague had. Its namesake came from symptomatic hemorrhages that turned black. The plague occurred from the bite of an insect, either by a scratch or bite while handling animals. It also could be contracted from breathing in airborne droplets from people who had an infection in their lungs. The first symptoms of the bubonic plague often appear within several days: headache and a general feeling of weakness, followed by aches and chills in the upper leg and groin, a white coating on the tongue, rapid pulse, slurred speech, fatigue, apathy and staggering gait. A blackish pustule usually would form at the point of the flea bite. By the third day, the lymph node begins to swell. Because the bite is commonly in the leg, the lymph nodes in the leg swell, which is how the disease got its name. The Greek word for "groin" is bubon, thus the name. The swelling then becomes tender, and perhaps as large as an egg. The heat fluctuates rapidly as it tries to pump blood through swollen, suffocating tissues. Subcutaneous hemorrhaging occurs, causing purple spots on the skin. The victim's nervous system began to collapse, causing dreadful pain and bizarre neurological disorders. By the end, wild anxiety and terror overtake the sufferer and then the sense of resignation, as the skin blackens and the rictus of death sets in on the body.

Though most people associate the Black Death with the middle ages, forms of the Bubonic Plague have been known in China as early as 224 BC. The Black Death embarked on a journey as an epidemic in the Gobi Desert in the 1320s. By 1400, China's population had been reduced to 90 million. Southwest Asia and Europe followed with strikingly similar losses in their populations. In 1347, the Tartars, who were nomads from the Euro-Asian Steppe, were thought to deliberately infect a European city with the plague. The Tartars had laid siege to the Genoese cathedral city and trading ports of Caffa on the Black Sea for a year. A deadly, ruthless, besieging army and was killing off soldiers at an unstoppable rate. It was plain to the Tartars that they must call off the siege, so they decided to retreat, they wanted to give the defenders a taste of what their army was suffering. So the Tartars used giant catapults to hurl the rotting corpses of the plagued victims over the walls of the town. By this means the infection spread among the Genoese defenders. Before long the Genoese were dying from the plague as fast as the Tartars on the outside. A few who thought that the plague would not reach their ships and headed for the Mediterranean. The deadly disease was unleashed at every port the ship arrived at. The trading routes contributed to the spread of the disease throughout the continent. Trading vessels from Crimea sailed west, bringing cargo infested with the disease burdened rodents and crew. Starting in Sicily in 1347, it began a four year reign of terror, traveling as far as Greenland. During this four year period it is believed Europe lost one full third of its population. Fathers abandoned their sick sons. Lawyers refused to come and make out wills for the dying. Friars and nuns were left to care for the sick, and monasteries and convents were soon deserted, as they were stricken, too. Bodies were left in empty houses, and there was no one to give them a proper burial. The terror of this seemingly unstoppable march of death was the unknown nature of its origin. The absence of an identifiable cause gave the plague supernatural and sinister qualities.

The effects the Plague had on the economy and the laws governing the state were severe. England is a perfect example. By 1350, the population had been so severely decreased that the commoner had the upper-hand on the land-lords. This was significant in that the commoner was able to demand a higher wage and the markedly increase in their mobility if one lord did not suit their needs. Without the market to cultivate and yield crops, the land-lords were in effect held without influence. The Parliament came to their rescue by imposing laws that restricted the movement of the laborers and limited their wages. Although this was effective at the time and serf's services continued, it resulted in a revolt some 30 years later. The end economic result of the Plague was somewhat surprising. Prices dropped and wages increased. Although not proven, the deflation of goods decreased because of a significant decrease in population. This gave rise to a new social relationship that would replace the status quo of centuries. A higher standard of living resulted for the lower class. High wages and a lower cost of living usually come with an opportunity of social advancement. By our standards, the advance was minimal, but by the conditions of the time, it was considerable. The laws that the English Parliament had passed to govern the lower class were a sign of changing times, but proof that a new era and social class were emerging.

Much of the Christian religion we see today was shaped from views developed by society at that time. Various forms of religion developed, but were far from what we recognize today. One of the most gruesome replications were the resurgence of Flagellants were convinced that the end of the world was at hand and the Plague was the wrath of God. They traveled in groups, bound by vows to abstain from all physical pleasures and to endure tortures and whippings for 33 days, in memory of the 33 life of Christ. In truth most Christians did believe the cause of the Plague was God's wrath on a wicked man. Many said they, by their own wickedness. There were also others who believed themselves condemned and in today's wording "Partied Hard thought, since tomorrow we die, let us eat, drink, and be merry.

During all this confusion the church's leadership in the lives of people weakened. Before the arrival of the Black Death the church was one of the wealthiest and most powerful landlords in all of Europe. The Catholic Church was injured both physically and economically; this had been the home of the Papacy for nearly a century, lost more than half of its monks. Consequently, religious dying was hard to come by. This was not only a result of the priests trying to fulfill their duties and becoming infected, but also sought to stay away. Those priests who had not fled but ministered to the dying during the plague were constantly exposed to many died. Consequently, new priests were often ordained without adequate training, and frequently the selection of priests was hasty and ill-advised, thus reducing the esteem people had for the church. Everywhere the Church was forced to resort to extraordinary ends to assure at least the semblance of the sacraments for the dying. When recognizing what was happening Pope Clement VI realized that nothing would be gained from his death and sought refuge in his chambers spending days sitting between two roaring fires on either side of him and rubbing an emerald ring, practices recommended to him to ward off the plague. Or consolation to the medical field was all this was done on the advice of the Papal physician. He survived as well as most of those who did by simply having the means to do so. People recognized the loss of the cleric alongside the peasant, lady of the court, and not distinguish evil from good, but simply took the lives of all. Overall there was a negative effect on the popularity of the church between faith and reason developed giving rise to religious, social, and political unrest. With the start of the plague Europeans desperately for help to answer their many questions, on why God would allow such a thing to occur. People throughout Europe prayed devoutly for deliverance from the plague and when their prayers weren't answered they began to change their methods administering the traditions which were attached to the church. They were left alone to live life without the powerful God which fear in all, during a very difficult era. Religion affected every aspect of everyday life and without it a new period of philosophic lay ahead. Religious reformer John Wycliffe, in England and John Huss, in Bohemia were leaders of a couple of many sects, challenged the Catholic Church's behavior and doctrine. Although decades later, these complaints eventually led to the formation of the Protestant Church.

The state of medical knowledge had in truth, caused more harm than good. The crucial role of rodents and fleas were never understood until centuries later. Wild theories ranged from the blaming of Jews who were thought to be ritually poisoning wells to the belief that the disease was carried on the warm, moist southerly breezes. Treatments included the practice of bleeding patients to release evil spirits; more often resulted in another viscous opening for the disease to enter. One physician maintained that the disruptiveness of places such as latrines would drive the sickness away, while others maintained it was the cause. Many peasants and uneducated believed the cause of the plague was a beautiful but an evil witch called the "plague maiden." It was said that when she passed she could infect those inside simply by waving a red scarf through an open window. People seeking tips on avoiding infection counseled to eat lots of figs and filberts before breakfast or not to sleep on their backs, and less pestilential air ran down their lungs. Bottom line, the only cure or better stated the only defense was isolation based on the medical knowledge at the time. Lords, Kings and even the Papacy were spared only through the revelation that being alone was the key to survival.

The Plague still maintains its identity today. Cases are still reported throughout the world. Thankfully, rarely in North America. Mortality has dropped from the 70 to 90% experienced in the 14th century to 3 to 5 % today. The loss of life in those years of history was immense. A plague of the proportions that struck Europe would be compared to the effects of a nuclear war. Imagine how a government of today's society would react to a disease with no cure that spread with the same rapidity and effectiveness. The answer lies just one unknown virus away in our own evolution cycle. Will the modern world survive?

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