

**MEDIEVAL EUROPE  
(476-1450): BUBONIC  
PLAGUE: EUROPE'S  
BLACK DEATH**



# MEDIEVAL EUROPE (476-1450): BUBONIC PLAGUE: EUROPE'S BLACK DEATH

## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Black Death swept across Europe in the late 1340s, what impact the plague had on how Europeans saw the Church and religion, and what modern scientific theories say about the calamity.

## Subjects

Science, European History, World History, Art

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Westminster Abbey, London
- Capella di Piazza, Siena, Italy
- Boccaccio statue, Uffizi, Florence
- Petrarch statue, Uffizi, Florence

## Essential Questions

- What was the Bubonic Plague that struck Europe in the late 1340s? What are the current scientific theories as to what caused it?
- Why did Europeans call the disease the “Black Death”? With their limited knowledge of medicine and science, how did late medieval Europeans see the plague?
- What impact did the plague have on how Europeans saw the Roman Catholic Church?
- What was the overall effect of the Plague on Europe’s population?

## Academic Summary

### **Rubric 643: Concerning A Mortality In The City Of Florence In Which Many People Died.**

In the year of the Lord 1348 there was a very great pestilence in the city and district of Florence. It was of such a fury and so tempestuous that in houses in which it took hold previously healthy servants who took care of the ill died of the same illness. Almost none of the ill survived past the fourth day. Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another. Those in town fled to villages. Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted vast sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. They inspected the urine from a distance and with something odoriferous under their nose. Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial. And those who died had neither confessor nor other sacraments. And many died with no one looking after them. And many died of hunger because when someone took to bed sick, another in the house, terrified, said to him: "I'm going for the doctor." Calmly walking out the door, the other left and did not return again. Abandoned by people, without food, but accompanied by fever, they weakened. There were many who pleaded with their relatives not to abandon them when night fell. But [the relatives] said to the sick person, "So that during the night you did not have to awaken those who serve you and who work hard day and night, take some sweetmeats, wine or water. They are here on the bedstead by your head; here are some blankets." And when the sick person had fallen asleep, they left and did not return. If it happened that he was strengthened by the food during the night he might be alive and strong enough to get to the window. If the street was not a major one, he might stand there a half hour before anyone came by. And if someone did pass by, and if he was strong enough that he could be heard when he called out to them, sometimes there might be a response and sometimes not, but there was no help. No one, or few, wished to enter a house where anyone was sick, nor did they even want to deal with those healthy people who came out of

a sick person's house. And they said to them: "He is stupefied, do not speak to him!" saying further: "He has it because there is a bubo in his house." They call the swelling a bubo. Many died unseen. So they remained in their beds until they stank. And the neighbors, if there were any, having smelled the stench, placed them in a shroud and sent them for burial. The house remained open and yet there was no one daring enough to touch anything because it seemed that things remained poisoned and that whoever used them picked up the illness.

At every church, or at most of them, they dug deep trenches, down to the waterline, wide and deep, depending on how large the parish was. And those who were responsible for the dead carried them on their backs in the night in which they died and threw them into the ditch, or else they paid a high price to those who would do it for them. The next morning, if there were many [bodies] in the trench, they covered them over with dirt. And then more bodies were put on top of them, with a little more dirt over those; they put layer on layer just like one puts layers of cheese in a lasagna.

The beccamorti [literally vultures] who provided their service, were paid such a high price that many were enriched by it. Many died from [carrying away the dead], some rich, some after earning just a little, but high prices continued.

Servants, or those who took care of the ill, charged from one to three florins per day and the cost of things grew. The things that the sick ate, sweetmeats and sugar, seemed priceless. Sugar cost from three to eight florins per pound. And other confections cost similarly. Capons and other poultry were very expensive and eggs cost between twelve and twenty-four pence each; and he was blessed who could find three per day even if he searched the entire city.

Finding wax was miraculous. A pound of wax would have gone up more than a florin if there had not been a stop put [by the communal government] to the vain ostentation that the Florentines always make [over funerals]. Thus it was ordered that no more than two large candles could be carried [in any funeral].

Churches had no more than a single bier which usually was not sufficient.

Spice dealers and beccamorti sold biers, burial palls, and cushions at very high prices. Dressing in expensive woolen cloth as is customary in [mourning] the dead, that is in a long cloak, with mantle and veil that used to cost women three florins climbed in price to thirty florins and would have climbed to 100 florins had the custom of dressing in expensive cloth not been changed. The rich dressed in modest woolens, those not rich sewed [clothes] in linen. Benches on which the dead were placed cost like the heavens and still the benches were only a hundredth of those needed. Priests were not able to ring bells as they would have liked. Concerning that [the government] issued ordinances discouraging the sounding of bells, sale of burial benches, and limiting expenses. They could not sound bells, sell benches, nor cry out announcements because the sick hated to hear of this and it discouraged the healthy as well. Priests and friars went [to serve] the rich in great multitudes and they were paid such high prices that they all got rich. And therefore [the authorities] ordered that one could not have more than a prescribed number [of

clerics] of the local parish church. And the prescribed number of friars was six. All fruits with a nut at the center, like unripe plums and unhusked almonds, fresh broadbeans, figs and every useless and unhealthy fruit, were forbidden entrance into the city. Many processions, including those with relics and the painted tablet of Santa Maria Inpruneta, went through the city crying out "Mercy" and praying and then they came to a stop in the piazza of the Priors. There they made peace concerning important controversies, injuries and deaths.

This [pestilence] was a matter of such great discouragement and fear that men gathered together in order to take some comfort in dining together. And each evening one of them provided dinner to ten companions and the next evening they planned to eat with one of the others. And sometimes if they planned to eat with a certain one he had no meal prepared because he was sick. Or if the host had made dinner for the ten, two or three were missing. Some fled to villas, others to villages in order to get a change of air. Where there had been no [pestilence], there they carried it; if it was already there, they caused it to increase.

None of the guilds in Florence was working. All the shops were shut, taverns closed; only the apothecaries and the churches remained open. If you went outside, you found almost no one. And many good and rich men were carried from home to church on a pall by four beccamorti and one tonsured clerk who carried the cross. Each of them wanted a florin. This mortality enriched apothecaries, doctors, poultry vendors, beccamorti, and greengrocers who sold of poultices of mallow, nettles, mercury and other herbs necessary to draw off the infirmity. And it was those who made these poultices who made a lot of money. Woolworkers and vendors of remnants of cloth who found themselves in possession of cloths [after the death of the entrepreneur for whom they were working] sold it to whoever asked for it. When the mortality ended, those who found themselves with cloth of any kind or with raw materials for making cloth was enriched. But many found [who actually owned cloths being processed by workers] found it to be moth-eaten, ruined or lost by the weavers. Large quantities of raw and processed wool were lost throughout the city and countryside.

*Marchione di Coppo Stefani, Florence Chronicle, 1370s*

Rubric 635: How Many Of the Dead Died Because Of the Mortality of the Year of Christ 1348

Now it was ordered by the bishop and the Lords [of the city government] that they should formally inquire as to how many died in Florence. When it was seen at the beginning of October that no more persons were dying of the pestilence, they found that among males, females, children and adults, 96,000 died between March and October.

*Marchione di Coppo Stefani, Florence Chronicle, 1370s*

How many valiant men, how many fair ladies, had breakfast with their kinfolk and the same night supped with their ancestors in the next world! The condition of the people was pitiable to behold. They sickened by the thousands daily, and

died unattended and without help. Many died in the open street, others dying in their houses, made it known by the stench of their rotting bodies. Consecrated churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches, like goods in a ship's hold and covered with a little earth.

*Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron, late 14th century*

My brother! My brother! My brother! A new beginning to a letter, though used by Marcus Tullius [Cicero] fourteen hundred years ago. Alas! my beloved brother, what shall I say? How shall I begin? Whither shall I turn? On all sides is sorrow; everywhere is fear. I would, my brother that I had never been born, or, at least, had died before these times. How will posterity believe that there has been a time when without the lightnings of heaven or the fires of earth, without wars or other visible slaughter, not this or that part of the earth, but well-nigh the whole globe, has remained without inhabitants. When has any such thing been even heard or seen; in what annals has it ever been read that houses were left vacant, cities deserted, the country neglected, the fields too small for the dead and a fearful and universal solitude over the whole earth?... Oh happy people of the future, who have not known these miseries and perchance will class our testimony with the fables. We have, indeed, deserved these [punishments] and even greater; but our forefathers also have deserved them, and may our posterity not also merit the same...

*Francisco Petrarca (Petrarch), "Letter to brother", 1348*

## Europe – 1348

People seemed to be dying everywhere. No one seemed immune to a mysterious disease that killed within just a few days. Rich and poor, young and old, pious and wretched, all seemed affected. Europeans were dying at an alarming rate, and no one had any answers as to why. Illness and death were a fact of medieval life. Most people lived short, brutish lives praying and hoping for peace through God's mercy, but this seemed different.

Europeans knew of only one example from their distant past that might explain the suffering in 1348. Although most people couldn't read, they had all heard stories from the Bible, including the tales of plagues in Egypt from the Book of Exodus, when God himself had punished the Egyptians for enslaving the Israelites. Only when the pharaoh freed the slaves did the plagues stop. Was God punishing Europeans in 1348 with this current scourge? If so, what had the people done to incur God's wrath? What about the Church? Was it somehow responsible? Many questions, but few answers.

Although the Black Death is believed by most scientists to have originated in Central Asia, the first reports of calamity in Europe appeared in the Crimea (in the eastern Black Sea) in 1346. Within five years, the outbreak has spread across Europe, killing an estimated 40-50% of the population. Now known to be caused by the *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria, but the cause was unknown to doctors in the medieval world. The bacterium is generally spread through the saliva of fleas that infest small black rats. Since late medieval Europeans had little understanding of sanitation and public health issues, it hardly seems surprising the plague spread through an area likely to be infested with

these rodents.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how the Black Death swept across Europe in the late 1340s, what impact the plague had on how Europeans saw the Church and religion, and what modern scientific theories say about the calamity.

## **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the Black Death spread so quickly across Europe in the late 1340s.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain what impact the Black Death had on how Europeans saw the Church and religion in the late 1340s.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the science behind the Black Death that spread across Europe in the late 1340s.

## **Procedure**

### **I. Anticipatory Set**

- Writing / Question: What is a pandemic? How does a modern pandemic spread? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### **II. Body of Lesson**

- Lecture / PPT – The Black Death (20 min)
- Videos – The Black Death (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about the Black Death. (15 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: How and why did the Black Death sweep across Europe in the late 1340s? What impact did the plague have on how Europeans saw the Church and religion? What do modern scientific theories have to say about the causes of the calamity?

### **III. Closure**

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail how and why the Black Death swept across Europe in the late 1340s, what impact the plague had on how Europeans saw the Church and religion, and what modern scientific theories have to say about the causes of the calamity.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Capella di Piazza, Siena**

While on tour, students in Siena's main square (Palazzo Pubblico) can see the Capella di Piazza (Chapel in the Square), an outdoor marble chapel that was erected by survivors of the 1348 plague that devastated the city, reducing it to less than 16,000 people. Work began on the original chapel in 1352, but subsequent changes done over the next 100 years brought it to where it is today. Before the plague, Siena was a thriving independent metropolis rivaling Florence and well known across Europe, both for its artists and for its 13th century university, but unlike its more famous Tuscan neighbor, the city was never able to recover from the devastating events of that fateful summer, eventually falling under the control of the Medici family.



## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.shsu.edu/~his\\_ncp/Boccaccio.html](http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Boccaccio.html)  
Boccaccio describes the Plague in Florence in the Introduction of the Decameron (primary source). From Nicholas J. Pappas, Professor of History at San Houston State University (TX).
- [www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html](http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html)  
Machione di Coppo Stefani, the Florentine Chronicle (primary source)
- [chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/primary-sources/179](http://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/primary-sources/179)  
Health Ordinances of Pistoia, 1348 (primary source). From Children and Youth in History at George Mason University (VA).
- [www.methacton.org/cms/lib/PA01000176/Centricity/Domain/121/plague\\_in\\_sienna\\_reading.pdf](http://www.methacton.org/cms/lib/PA01000176/Centricity/Domain/121/plague_in_sienna_reading.pdf)  
Plague in Siena (primary source) – also contains activity questions based on the reading selection. Highly recommended for all classes studying the Plague.
- [www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.asp)  
The Black Death and the Jews 1348-1349 CE (primary source) – from the Internet History Sourcebook at Fordham University.
- [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/plague.htm](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/plague.htm)  
The Black Death, 1348 (website)
- [www.historyguide.org/ancient/lecture29b.html](http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/lecture29b.html)  
Lecture 29: the Black Death (website) – from the History Guide (UK)
- [courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101/web/32death.htm](http://courses.wcupa.edu/jones/his101/web/32death.htm)  
The Impact of the Black Death (website) – from Jim Jones, History Professor at West Chester University (PA)
- [www.themcs.org/black%20death.htm](http://www.themcs.org/black%20death.htm)  
The Black Death (website)
- [www.nature.com/nature/journal/v478/n7370/full/nature10549.html](http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v478/n7370/full/nature10549.html)  
“A Draft Genome of Yersinia Pestis from victims of the Black Death” (scholarly article) – from Nature International Weekly Journal of Science (October 2011)
- [www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/science/13plague.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/science/13plague.html?_r=0)  
Scientists Solve Puzzle of Black Death’s DNA (article) – from the NY times
- [www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/themes/diseases/black\\_death.aspx](http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/broughttolife/themes/diseases/black_death.aspx)  
Brought to Life: the Black Death (interactive website) – from the Science Museum (UK). Interactive website for all ages. Highly recommended for teachers and students.
- [www.pptpalooza.net/PPTs/EHAP/BlackPlague.ppt](http://www.pptpalooza.net/PPTs/EHAP/BlackPlague.ppt)  
The Black Death (PowerPoint) – from Susan Pojer, AP European History teacher at Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, NY.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y\\_qVG8xnjY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4y_qVG8xnjY)

History's Turning Points: AD 1347 The Black Death (video) – from the History Channel

- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMQsBECWaXY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMQsBECWaXY)  
1348 – History of Britain: Plague (video). 60-minute BBC documentary is perhaps too long for most classes, but it is well worth it. Highly recommended for students and teachers, perhaps in an out-of-class setting.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5U0Fah\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5U0Fah_k)  
The Mystery of the Black Death (video) – 45-minute documentary by the Discovery Channel

## **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Death](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death)  
Black Death – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yersinia\\_pestis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yersinia_pestis)  
Yersinia Pestis – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/Florence](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/Florence)  
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel

## **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-  
tales](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales)  
Medieval England – Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215)  
Medieval England – Magna Carta 1215
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy)  
Medieval France – The Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge)  
Medieval / Renaissance Venice - The Doge: Merchant Rulers of the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348)  
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague 1348
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-inferno](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Inferno
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-paradiso](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Paradiso
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Purgatorio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco)  
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-  
travels](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels)  
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade)

### Medieval Venice – Fourth Crusade

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain)  
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain 711-1492
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054)  
Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453

### **Key Terms**

- Black Death
- Bubonic Plague
- Flagellant
- Lymphatic system
- Yersinia Pestis

