

COPING WITH CATASTROPHE: THE BLACK DEATH OF THE 14TH CENTURY

A Unit of Study for Grades 7-12

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

For generations, the Black Death left virtually no one untouched in Europe, parts of Asia, and northern Africa. From the available records it can be estimated that in the mid-fourteenth century during the first wave of the plague, Europe lost a third or more of its population. Recurrences at intervals of a few years or a few decades further decimated the demoralized survivors. Though outside of Europe documentary evidence for the plague is sparse, similar rates of mortality can be assumed from the evidence that does exist.

Fear of death infected all. Everyone was personally touched by the deaths of those around them: family, friends, neighbors, and those whose services were vital to the community; farmers, shopkeepers, craftspeople, clergy, teachers, laborers, officials, and governmental authorities of every kind. Medieval society had to adapt to, and cope with, the catastrophic situation. There is good reason for the claim that the Black Death was an event of major historical importance. This unit gives students an opportunity to grapple with the question of how and on the basis of what criteria, historical importance may be assessed.

The response of individuals and institutions to the crisis of the Black Death was shaped by, and in turn influenced, culture and society. Studying the plague and its impact hones understanding of the historical period during which it occurred. Because of its dramatic nature, and the extreme reactions it provoked, it also provides an unusually good opportunity for students to gain an empathetic rather than just an intellectual understanding of how the mind-sets of a remote time-period were both similar to and different from their own.

In a broader context, study of the Black Death will also alert students to the importance of demography, or the study of population, and will prepare them for consideration of other periods when demography played an important part in patterns of change.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit deals with the causes, course, characteristics and results of the Black Death in the fourteenth century. It lends itself to teaching in a number of contexts. For instance, it could serve as part of a unit on the Middle Ages, as background to the Renaissance-Reformation period in Europe, or as an example of a historical process transcending political boundaries. It may also be used as a basis for comparison with other demographic events that had major historical consequences, such as the Indian population crash in the Americas after Europeans arrived there in the sixteenth-century.

III. CORRELATION TO THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

Coping with Catastrophe provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History, World History Era 5*, “Intensified Hemispheric Interactions 1000-1500 CE,” **Standards 5A** and **5B**. In addition, this unit addresses **Historical Thinking Standards 2**, “Historical Comprehension;” **3**, “Historical Analysis and Interpretation;” and **5**, “Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision Making.”

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To further students’ empathetic acquaintance with fourteenth century conditions of life and ways of thought, and how these were connected.
2. To help students analyze and appreciate the complexity of the causes and consequences of the Black Death.
3. To raise student awareness of the practical, psychological, and intellectual methods that individuals and institutions used to cope with catastrophic conditions, and how social, technological, and medical conditions of the times limited the methods available to them.
4. To alert students to the potential impact of rapid demographic change on society.
5. To give students experience at studying, analyzing, and comparing various kinds of historical evidence for reliability.
6. To encourage students to assess the historical significance of events such as the Black Death.

V. LESSON PLANS

1. No Escape from Death: The Catastrophic Plague Arrives
2. Trying to Cope: Explanations and Counter-measures
3. The Impact on Society: Short and Long-range Consequences of the Population Crash

VI. INTRODUCTION TO THE BLACK DEATH

In the mid-fourteenth century, the plague pandemic first known as the Great Dying and later as the Black Death arrived from Central Asia to afflict Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Carried by infected fleas that infested black rats, clothing, bedding, or human body hair, the plague appeared first in Europe and the Middle East in ports. Then it progressed quickly along rivers and roads into towns and cities, progressing more slowly into rural areas inland. Bubonic plague, the most common form of the disease, killed people in three to five days. It began with high fever climbing to 105 degrees, then caused convulsions, vomiting, and agonizingly painful swellings. These sores, or *booes*, which gave their name to the disease, appeared in the lymph glands and could be the size of an egg or apple. Between two thirds and four fifths of those bitten by fleas and infected by the disease died. The pneumonic form of plague affected the lungs and could be transmitted directly person to person by coughing, sneezing, or even breathing. This form was always fatal and could kill within a matter of hours.

All in all, during the initial half-century or so of recurring outbreaks, about one-third to one-half of the population died in areas that the plague reached. In crowded cities, the death toll was higher and dying was faster. For instance, in the Italian town of Pistoia (where population had already dropped significantly owing to the famines of the early fourteenth century), it is estimated that about two thirds of the population died during the plague's first occurrence in 1348. Three more waves of plague afflicted the city there 1400. In the last of these half the remaining population died. In the next half-century or so, the plague returned six more times.

Medical knowledge at the time was helpless in the face of the disease. People did not agree on what caused it or on how to treat it. Many different explanations were put forward, drawing on both pre-existing beliefs and actual observations. The most widespread theories were God's anger with sinful humanity, the malign influence of comets, the conjunction of planets, and the activities of demons and devils. Several learned authorities thought "tainted air" was the cause, since illness was known to be associated with rotting corpses, the reeking filth, and the fetid mists rising from swamps. Some argued that exposure to people already sick or to objects contaminated by contact with them caused infection. At times, sheer human malice was blamed.

Although many doctors, officials, and ordinary folk admitted that nothing anyone did seemed to make a difference, people took a number of religious, magical, and practical measures to try to prevent or cure the plague. These ranged from religious rituals to strict enforcement of existing sanitary laws to control garbage and urban pollution; from burning the possessions of those who