Plagued with Peril:
The Triumph and Tragedy of the Black Death

Greta Willink
Junior Division
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“We are all bound thither; we are hastening to the same common goal. Black death calls all things under the sway of its laws.” - Ovid

Europe Meets the Plague

In October of 1347, twelve ships traveling from Ethiopia’s medieval kingdom Kaffa reached the ports of Messina, Sicily where the sailors collapsed from the disease they had carried with them. The men were infected with Yersinia pestis, an extremely contagious and dangerous bacterial organism that spreads through the Oriental rat flea. The ships were quickly sent away but it was too late. Yersinia pestis, better known as the Black Plague would infect Europe within the following six years, spreading throughout the continent and destroying the population as medieval Europeans knew it. It was indeed a tragedy that would stand in history for all time. Within the midst of 14th century Europe, a bacterial disease known as the Black Death spread throughout the continent causing panic, inevitable death, and an ultimate tragedy to the millions in Europe who were impacted by the plague. When the disease wore away, survivors were left behind who would soon lead the way to a changed, stronger, and more united Europe for generations to come.

Black Death’s Background

Around 1300, the bacteria that started the plague called Yersinia pestis broke out within inner Asia near present-day Lake Kyrgyzstan. Over the next thirty years, the plague would spread throughout Asia reaching many Middle Eastern countries and even China. Eventually, the plague spread to cities near the Caspian Sea and quickly infected the coastlines of many medieval cities, including the city of Kaffa in Ethiopia. In 1340, seven years before the plague reached Europe, witness Gilles Li Muisis wrote “It is almost impossible to believe the mortality through the whole
country. Travelers have found cattle wandering without herdsmen in the fields, towns, and wastelands. They have seen barnes and winecellars standing wide open, houses empty.”

Before the plague became a major problem in Europe, many thought the disease was escapable. At first, many people tried to run away before the plague reached their households. Families found new cities and triumphed because it seemed as though they had beat the plague, when really, they had only given up their former homes for nothing. The sickness was oftentimes already a part of these families, and by running away, they would only spread the plague to new cities. This is how the plague eventually ended up in Europe. When the disease grew especially strong, people attempted to escape by ship and, in turn, brought the plague to Europe.

Efforts to Escape

Soon after the plague began to spread, a witness named Gabriele de’ Mussi shared his account of the world around him. “Alas! Our ships enter the port, but of a thousand sailors hardly ten are spared… Woe to us for we cast at them the darts of death! Whilst we spoke to them, whilst they embraced us and kissed us, we scattered the poison from our lips. Going back to their homes, they in turn soon infected their whole families, who in three days succumbed, and were buried in one common grave.” If one person interacted with another who carried the plague, he would become sick along with the people in his home and anyone who interacted with him while he was sick. In fact, Boccaccio once said that victims “ate breakfast with their friends and dinner with their ancestors in paradise,” meaning that some forms of the plague were so deadly, that they could kill a person within hours.
As more ships from infected countries attempted to escape to Europe, the more desperate Europeans became to keep away the sailors at all costs, sometimes attacking the ships, because they knew that everyone inside carried the bacteria that could destroy their cities. A chronicler wrote that "The Genoese drove them away from that port with fiery arrows and engines of war. For no man dared touch them. If any man traded with the crew, he would surely die right away. Thus, the galleys were scattered from port to port." It was not long before the plague victims started piling up. Soon there were so many people dying by day that dozens of corpses were buried together in mass graves. Seeing the piles of dead near their churches made Europeans panic. As much as they tried to fight the plague, it only spread faster and soon all of Europe was battling the gruesome disease.

**Terror and Tragedy**

It did not take long before the true danger of the plague became apparent to Europe. Many people turned their backs on family members and fought for their own lives. The disease was so contagious that some doctors would not even visit a sick home. When talking about the plague, Samuel Pepys said "Realizing what a deadly disaster had come to them the people quickly drove the Italians from their city… 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… Bodies were left in empty houses, and there was no one to give them a Christian burial." People were so afraid of getting sick that they refused to do their jobs, and the fear of the plague only continued to grow.

When the plague first arrived in Europe, there were plenty of doctors to look for a cure. However, as doctors were the people who visited the sick the most, many of them quickly died of
the disease and the remaining educated doctors were widely outnumbered by the sick. Due to the shortage of doctors, many uneducated people, both men and women alike, became physicians. Within a very short period of time, doctors realized there was nothing they could do to help victims. Even the richest of people could not pay doctors enough to save their loved ones. When a doctor was called to the house of a sick person, they would not visit in hopes to heal the person, they would visit to record another death. Gilles Li Muisis wrote “No one was secure, whether rich or poor. Everyone, from day to day, waited on the will of the Lord.”

The phrase “desperate times call for desperate measures” is a great way to sum up the motives behind some insane precautions Europeans took to avoid sickness. For example, if a dying man was in a living space with other people who were taking care of him, those people would be dead within a week. The reality of the Black Death was that if a sick man so much as coughed on another person, he had just killed that person. Knowing that everyone in the house of a sick person would die, some Europeans would trap these people inside their own homes by blocking the doors and windows with wooden boards and nailing the entrances shut. This horrible practice was one of many that was born of out of pure desperation to end the plague.

**Bubonic, Pneumonic, and Septicemic**

When a person would become infected with the plague, they would have one of three forms of the sickness. Bubonic, Pneumonic, or Septicemic. The most common form of the plague is called Bubonic and this disease targets one’s lymphatic system. A person’s lymphatic system has two main jobs. It uses groups of organs and tissues to rid the body of toxins, and it moves a fluid called lymph throughout the body that contains white blood cells. When the bubonic plague
would take over a person's body, it would keep the lymphatic system from doing its job which is how buboes were formed. Most often, buboes were formed in the armpit or groin areas because that is where the lymph nodes that filter lymph are located. If the lymphatic system is unable to do its job, the lymph nodes will become clogged and then begin to swell into a large bump on the skin called a bubo. Sometimes, buboes could be lanced, but this practice rarely had an impact. After three days, the buboes would often burst and in the most common scenario, the victim would die, often because of the combination of a weakened immune system and common flu symptoms.

The second and most contagious form of the plague was Pneumonic. The Pneumonic plague would spread through the air which made it especially dangerous because this form of the plague in particular would cause victims to cough. This type of the disease targeted one’s lungs, and had a mortality rate close to 100%, meaning it was nearly impossible to survive. Over the course of one to two days, the pneumonic plague would eat away at and basically liquify the lungs and the victim would cough them up over the period of time they remained sick. The quick destruction of the lungs and intense cough that stood as a main side effect to the Pneumonic plague made it especially dangerous to anyone who came in contact with the air a sick person would breathe, let alone the sick victims themselves. Unfortunately, anyone who cared for a victim of the Pneumonic plague would have to accept that they, along with anyone else in the house with the victim would likely be dead by the end of the week.

The final, rarest, and most deadly form of the plague is called the Septicemic plague. Essentially, the Septicemic form of the plague destroys a person's ability to clot blood and it keeps oxygen from flowing throughout the body properly. This means that the victim’s skin would die, causing them to bleed out, often over the course of hours within coming in contact with the plague.
Blood would drain through any openings in the body until the victim would die due to mass blood loss. The Septicemic plague is also the disease most known for causing the fingers and toes to turn black as blood would drain from the entire body, causing the limbs to die off one by one.

Regardless of the form, Friar Michelle put it best, stating that “A sort of boil erupted on the thigh or arm. Then the victims violently coughed up blood. After three days of constant vomiting, they died. And with them died everyone who had talked to them. Anyone who had touched or laid hands on their belongings died too.”

**Risky Remedies**

Though they attempted to keep the plague away at all costs, Europeans quickly realized that the death that had attached itself to the disease was inevitable, and this made people panic. Europeans became desperate to escape the sickness, and oftentimes made their situations worse when they would follow common superstitions that existed at the time, such as going by the belief that bathing is bad for one's health, or the idea that putrid scents would protect a person from catching the disease through air. Unfortunately, these ideas had no impact on the disease, and the people who depended on such remedies died along with any others who became sick.

One way that Europeans unknowingly made the plague worse had to do with the rumors of witchcraft. Nowadays, witches sound like made-up stories for Halloween, but in 14th century Europe, witchcraft seemed all too real. When the plague became a major issue in large cities, the churches made out the disease to be less of a natural tragedy and more of a punishment from the wrath of God. When people started blaming sin for the plague, many churches thought that witches were responsible for the disease. Especially within the middle ages, black cats were
associated with witches, and many Europeans believed that the Devil could turn into a black cat. Due to this superstition, thousands of cats were killed. Unfortunately, instead of fixing the problem, ridding Europe of cats only caused the rat population to spike, meaning that the plague would only spread more rapidly throughout Europe.

A factor that likely had an impact on the plague’s ability to spread is the hygiene, or lack there of 14th century Europeans. Cities in medieval Europe were already very filthy. People dumped their chamber pots onto the roads and butchers would kill animals on the streets without cleaning up afterwards. Many shared their houses with common farm animals and they seldom changed their clothes or even undressed. This made 14th century Europe the perfect place for rats and fleas to live and flourish. Doctors did not know what caused the plague or how to stop it so many of them came up with their own theories as to how to rid Europe of the plague. Some doctors thought cleaning the air with flowers and sweet herbs would make the air safer to breathe, while other doctors, such as John Colle, thought breathing in bad smells would protect people from the Pneumonic plague. This theory led people to keep rotting dead animals in their homes that were called “stinks,” while some even crouched over public outhouses for hours, breathing in the smells of human waste. However, inhaling putrid air only made Europeans sicker.

**The Triumph Within the Tragedy**

When looking back on the Black Death, most people would not have many positive things to say about the terrible pandemic. However, when the plague faded away in the early 1350s after survivors secluded themselves from others for long periods of time, those who lived through the Black Death were able to come together and celebrate their strength. Scientist Pat Lee Shipman
put it this way: "the bubonic plague left its mark on the human population of Europe, showing that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” When the plague had vanished, many people danced, sang, and worshipped. Overjoyed and exhausted, Europe was relieved. The continent was finally free of the disease that had controlled it for years.

A newfound freedom came with the end of the plague causing birth rates to shoot up drastically, and the children born were born into a more united Europe than what had existed ten years before. Furthermore, there were many more jobs for the unemployed, and there was more food for people who had previously been starving on the streets. Although the plague in Europe was a tragedy, tragedies bring people together and the Black Death did just that. Sometime after the sickness was gone, the survivors were able to join forces, grow, and rebuild their continent. They were stronger together.

The Black Death will always be featured in history for its might and strength compared to human life. Ole Benedictow put it this way: "A historical turning point, as well as a vast human tragedy, the Black Death of 1346-53 is unparalleled in human history.” In 14th century Europe, a powerful plague raged through the continent and killed millions. True, the Black Death was tragic, but it is also told that the people who lived through a plague as strong as that of 1347 lived to see a better world.
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Feb. 2019. The website *History Today* gives a lot of information about the deaths in Europe during the plague. The author of the article, Ole J. Benedictow, described how bodies were layered between coats of soil and other corpses when buried in mass graves and how the mass graves were later used by scientists to study the plague. This information was used to support how bodies were buried when talking about the growing numbers of dead.

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[www.doctorsreview.com/history/doctors-black-death/](http://www.doctorsreview.com/history/doctors-black-death/). Accessed 3 Feb. 2019. *Doctors of the Black Death* is a very informative article that also happens to have a very self-explanatory title. Most of the given information has to do with the lack of medicine in the time of the plague, how that affected people, and how that affected a plague doctor's job, considering there was no cure. Information from this article was mostly used in the section *Terror and Tragedy*.

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Senker, Cath. *The Black Death 1347 - 1350*. Chicago, Illinois, Reed Elsevier, 2006. *The Black Death 1347 - 1350* is a very informative book that gives details about nearly everything to do with the plague in the 14th century, even the background and aftermath. Overall, the book gives plenty of information about old theories about cures for the plague, how people made the plague worse, and why the plague happened. Information from this book is used throughout the essay, but mostly when writing about how the plague came to Europe.


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Some of the information includes symptoms, history, and survivors. Facts from this article can be found all throughout the entire paper.