The Black Death — a 14th century plague

Links with our times

In 1997, eighteen people in Hong Kong were infected with a form of influenza unknown in human beings. Six of them died. Their disease was identified as a type of flu previously found only in poultry such as chickens, ducks and geese. It was the first time this type of flu had crossed from birds to humans, and it became known as ‘bird flu’ or ‘avian flu’. In 2005 this strain of flu was discovered in migratory birds in China and Central Asia. The newly appointed United Nations Coordinator for Avian and Human Influenza warned that the spread of this form of the disease could kill anywhere from 5 to 150 million people worldwide. The very mobile nature of migratory birds increased the level of fear and panic at the time. Fortunately, the worst predictions were not realised — but why would we panic about such a disease?

Two examples, one from recent history and one from medieval history, can help us answer this question. Between 1918 and 1920 an extremely infectious type of influenza known as the Spanish Flu spread from the United States to virtually all parts of the world, killing over 50 million people. When an infectious disease spreads across a significant part of the world
and causes illness in large numbers of people, it is known as a pandemic. More people died of the Spanish Flu than had been killed in World War I.

Although it happened many hundreds of years ago, the horror of the Black Death pandemic of the fourteenth century still has a strong influence on us. Millions of people died a horrible death from this disease and were completely powerless to prevent or treat it. When new illnesses suddenly arise, with no apparent treatment, it is not surprising that our historical experiences lead us to fear the possible consequences.

As you work through this chapter, look for information that will help you to answer these questions:

1. What was the Black Death, and how did it cause the death of so many people?
2. How did fourteenth-century living conditions and the state of medical knowledge leave the population defenceless against serious disease?
3. Why did the Black Death break out when it did, and where did it spread?
4. How did people attempt to deal with the disease?
5. What were the consequences of the Black Death in Europe and other parts of the world?

6. Can you think of any recent health scares that have caused concern in different parts of the world?
7. What is a pandemic? Do you think HIV/AIDS is considered a modern pandemic?
8. Why is it possible for disease today to spread rapidly to all parts of the world?
9. What do you think would be the consequences today if we suffered from a pandemic that killed one-third of the world’s population?
The Black Death was a catastrophic event that had a huge impact on all the countries it passed through. There are many types of primary and secondary sources that help historians understand this event, particularly its effects in Europe. For example, there are a large number of written accounts of how the plague affected people, and many artists also recorded their own observations in paintings and woodcuts.

We do not know as much about how the plague affected Asia and Africa; however, advances in medical science in recent times have helped us to understand the nature and spread of the disease that savaged so much of the known world in the fourteenth century.

**Written sources**

Many written accounts of the Black Death survive to this day. In monasteries throughout Europe, monks took on the responsibility of recording in various **chronicles** the events occurring around them.

Individual writers such as Geoffrey the Baker or the monk Henry Knighton recorded the impact of the plague in England. In Italy, Agnolo di Tura described in detail the effect of the plague on the people of the city of Siena. The Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio used the Black Death as a basis for his fictional work *The Decameron* (see **Source 1**), and the poet Petrarch used his poetry to express his personal feelings about the huge loss of life caused by the disease.

Medieval church parishes kept written records of baptisms, marriages and deaths. Although the huge numbers killed by the Black Death often meant that priests or monks could not keep their records completely up-to-date, some quite accurate details of the deaths in particular parishes still survive.

**Medical science**

At the time of the Black Death, no-one had any idea of the actual causes of disease. It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that medical science was able to identify disease-causing bacteria. By comparing the descriptions and drawings of the disease as provided by medieval writers and artists, medical scientists have been able to compare these symptoms with those of known diseases. This has allowed them to develop an explanation as to what caused the Black Death.

**Archaeological evidence**

Many medieval villages lost almost all their inhabitants during the Black Death. Many villages were left completely deserted at the time, while others were abandoned by the small number of surviving inhabitants in the years following the plague. These people found that the village could not function with its reduced population, and so they moved to other locations. Modern aerial photography can show us where these deserted medieval villages were once located (see **Source 3**).
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Contemporary artists

Just as writers were keen to record the events happening around them, artists produced drawings and paintings showing many aspects of the Black Death. As well as illustrating the symptoms of the disease in their artworks, artists were inspired to explore themes of death and destruction. The Danse Macabre (or ‘dance of death’) was a theme explored by many artists in the years following the Black Death (see Source 4). It demonstrated that life was fragile and that death would eventually affect everyone, no matter how rich or important a person might be.

chronicle a record of events as they happened, usually written by a person who was present at the time they occurred

Source 3 The medieval village of Bingham’s Melcombe in England was abandoned shortly after the Black Death. The location can be seen in this aerial photograph. The fourteenth-century church still survives.

Source 4 The Danse Macabre was an artistic theme inspired by the effects of the Black Death.

Source 4 The Danse Macabre was an artistic theme inspired by the effects of the Black Death.

Activities

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

1 Although Boccaccio’s Decameron (see Source 1) is a work of fiction, it can still provide useful historical information. How can works of fiction help us to find out about the past?
2 Read Source 2. What does this source reveal about the symptoms of the plague?
3 How can archaeological evidence such as that in Source 3 help us to understand the effects of the Black Death?
4 Explain the basic idea behind artworks associated with the Danse Macabre as shown in Source 4.
5 Why might church parish records of deaths caused by the Black Death not always be a reliable source of information about the impact of the disease?
6 Why would it be unlikely that primary sources could provide reliable information about the spread of the plague?
11.2 What was the Black Death?

During the time the terrible disease known as the Black Death was killing so many people in all parts of the known world, no-one actually knew what caused it. Today we understand that the bite of a flea that lived on black rats helped spread the disease. However, this was completely unknown in the fourteenth century.

Why ‘Black Death’?

There are a number of theories about the origin of the English name ‘Black Death’. The most popular of these comes from the appearance of the disease in its final stages. At this time, small black or purple blotches appeared on the skin of those suffering from the disease, and this may have contributed to the name. In French, the disease was known as morte bleue (‘Blue Death’). The Latin name pestis atra (‘terrible plague’) was widely used by educated writers of the time.

Three diseases in one

The Black Death appears to have been a combination of three related diseases, all of which had different symptoms and different ways of being transmitted to humans. The first of these was the bubonic plague. This was so named because of the ‘buboes’ that appeared on the victims’ bodies. These buboes were pus-filled swellings of the lymph nodes in the groin, under the armpits and on the neck. This disease was not necessarily fatal by itself and recovery was possible. A far more severe form of the disease was the pulmonary or pneumonic plague. This form attacked the lungs and was always fatal. The third form was septicaemic plague, which aggressively attacked the bloodstream. In this form the bacteria multiplied so fast that the person would die within hours of infection, with bleeding into the skin causing purple–black blotches to appear.

How did it spread?

In 1894 scientists identified a bacterium known by the scientific name of Yersinia pestis. This is now understood to be the cause of all three forms of the plague. These bacteria were transmitted by a number of different types of flea. One such flea was commonly found living on the bodies of black rats. Wherever the rats thrived, the fleas had the opportunity to bite other animals and humans, usually infecting them with the bubonic or septicaemic form of the disease. Fleas could bite many people.

Pneumonic plague was the most contagious form of the disease because it infected the lungs. This would cause severe coughing, which would spray the bacteria out into the air. The disease could be breathed in by anyone close by, who would then be infected.
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Origins

Bubonic plague appears to be endemic to certain parts of the world, including western Arabia, Kurdistan, northern India and the Gobi Desert. It usually lies dormant, but at different times in history it has broken out in the form of major pandemics. In the sixth and seventh centuries CE it spread from Arabia, reaching Egypt in 542 and then spreading through Europe. It eventually reached Ireland in 664. In the 1890s, a pandemic that began in Yunnan Province in China spread to northern India, killing over six million people. In 1900 it arrived in Australia and killed over 550 people. Recent scientific research has suggested that the medieval pandemic known as the Black Death may have originated near Lake Issyk-Kul, in north-eastern Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia. From there it spread into China, India and the Middle East and Europe.

**Sources**

Source 1

Source 2

Source 3

Source 4

**Activities**

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. Explain the three forms of the Black Death, including how each was transmitted and how the body was affected in each case.

**CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

2. a. What does it mean if a disease is endemic?

   b. Identify two parts of the world in which bubonic plague appears to be endemic.

   c. Why do these parts of the world not suffer from the plague all the time?

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

3. Examine Source 1 and explain why the Black Death may have been given that name.

4. Using Source 2, explain what buboes are and how they affect the body.

5. How does Source 3 help us to understand the role of the flea in transmitting the plague from person to person?

6. What information would the rat-catchers in Source 4 have had that was not available to the people of the Middle Ages?

**HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH**

7. Using the internet and your library, prepare a brief report on the bubonic plague outbreak that occurred in Australia in 1900. Which areas were the worst affected, and what steps were taken to deal with the disease?
11.3 Living conditions and medical science in the fourteenth century

The High Middle Ages (c. 1100–1300 CE) in Europe was a period of rapid population growth and relative prosperity. It saw the expansion of towns and cities. Many of these were filthy and overcrowded, providing ideal conditions for the spread of disease. Medical science at the time was totally inadequate and unprepared for the plague that was to come.

**Living condition in medieval cities**

Medieval cities such as London, Paris and Florence grew very rapidly during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with little thought given to proper planning or healthy living conditions. Most houses were small, containing only one or two rooms. Privacy was not a particularly high priority, and even members of reasonably well-off families would all sleep in the same room. Amongst the poor, it was not unusual for as many as a dozen people to all sleep on the floor together. In country villages, they would often be joined by their livestock. If someone became ill, it was physically impossible to isolate them from other members of the family. So if one member of the family became sick, it was likely that all would catch the same illness.

**Hygiene and sanitation**

In a small village, the removal of rubbish and human waste was relatively simple, but in an overcrowded town it became a more difficult problem. The streets were narrow, usually with a drain running down the middle that was meant to carry waste away. However, these drains regularly filled up and so the waste remained. Often the drains fed into the same rivers and streams from which people drew their drinking water. While breathing in foul air or drinking contaminated water could not spread the Black Death, cases of gastric diseases such as *dysentery* and diarrhoea were common. If the body was weakened because of such diseases, the plague could take hold more easily, and death was likely to occur much sooner.
Life expectancy

Although the average life expectancy in Australia today is about 82 years, most people did not live this long in medieval times. Death from infectious disease was common and children were the most likely victims. Close to a quarter of all babies died within the first year of life. Less than half of all children would reach the age of ten. Those who passed the age of ten had a reasonable chance of reaching adulthood and perhaps living to around forty years of age. Only a small minority lived to what we would regard as old age.

Medical science in the Middle Ages

Medical knowledge in the Middle Ages was based largely on ancient knowledge and had not advanced much for a thousand years. Doctors relied largely on the theories of ancient physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen. In the fourth century BCE, the Greek physician Hippocrates was one of the first to determine that illness was not a result of a curse from the gods. He promoted the idea that illness and disease were part of nature and could be influenced by factors such as diet and a person’s living habits. Nevertheless, he was completely unaware of...
microscopic organisms as a cause of disease. The Greek physician and philosopher Galen lived in Rome in the second century CE. Because human dissections were illegal under Roman law, Galen carried out anatomical dissections on various animals. He proposed theories on the operation of the brain and the nervous system, as well as on the circulation of the blood throughout the body. Although many of his theories were later proved to be incorrect, they were the definitive word on medical science in Europe. Medieval doctors refused to accept any idea that was not consistent with Galen’s theories and so were not willing to accept any new evidence relating to the causes or spread of disease.

Bloodletting, as shown in this fifteenth-century artwork, involved the draining of a measured amount of blood from a vein believed to be connected to the diseased organ in the body. Source 3

This sixteenth-century diagram illustrates the four humours that medieval doctors believed determined the health of the body. Source 2

Treating the sick
The treatment of illness and disease in the Middle Ages was based more on superstition and ignorance than on any genuine medical knowledge. Medieval doctors believed that the body contained four ‘humours’ or aspects that influenced a person’s state of health (see Source 2). These humours were black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. While they were in balance, the body would be healthy. Illness occurred when these humours were out of balance in the body. In these circumstances, one common cure was to drain blood from the body through a process of bloodletting (see Source 3). Applying leeches to the body to suck the blood was an alternative method of restoring the body’s balance (see Source 4). Herbal medicines were also popular, but often contained poisons, and so were sometimes more dangerous than the disease. Surgery was usually carried out by barbers, and was rarely successful. Amputations of injured or diseased limbs were the most common form of surgery. Because of the strong religious beliefs of the time, most people believed that prayer was the most effective way of dealing with serious illness.
Life suddenly gets harder

The growth in population throughout Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries quickly led to most of the best farming land being overworked. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the quantity and quality of crops were in decline. This raised the threat of famine. To make matters worse, there appears to have been a change in weather patterns early in the fourteenth century, with the winter of 1306–07 the coldest experienced in over 300 years. As the colder and wetter weather took hold, farming conditions became worse, with the years 1315–17 bringing crop failures and widespread famine. The 1320s and 1330s saw frequent famine conditions continue as the weather and overworked soils brought regular crop failures. By the 1340s the standard of health of much of the European population was very poor, with little resistance to serious disease. It was to this ravaged population that the Black Death was to bring unprecedented death and destruction.

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
1 Explain the contributions made by Hippocrates and Galen to medieval medical knowledge.
2 Why had there been no significant advances in medical knowledge in Europe for over a thousand years?
3 Of all babies born in medieval times, approximately what proportion could expect to reach adulthood?
4 How did most people in the Middle Ages attempt to deal with illness?
5 What happened in the first half of the fourteenth century in Europe to make people more susceptible to disease?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
6 Using Source 1, list three reasons why people living in medieval times were at greater risk of disease than we are today.
7 Explain the purpose of the medical treatments depicted in Sources 3 and 4.
8 a How do we know the patient in Source 4 was an important person?
     b From the reactions of the three other people in Source 4, what can you identify as one of the patient’s symptoms?

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH
9 Each of the four humours depicted in Source 2 was associated with a number of other natural and human characteristics. Using resources from your library and the internet, find out the following:
     a What were the names of each of the humours?
     b What elements in nature was each humour associated with?
     c How were the humours believed to have influenced a person’s personality and mood?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS
10 Imagine that you are a medieval barber. Design an illustrated sign for your shop advertising all of the services you provide, including various types of amputations.
Religious beliefs were central to medieval life. When good things happened, people believed they were being rewarded for their good deeds, and illness and disease were seen as a punishment from God.

The importance of religion
As you have learned, the Roman Catholic Church was central to medieval European life. Most people were illiterate and very superstitious, and they relied heavily on priests for education and guidance on events that happened around them. Those who did not follow the Christian religion were viewed with suspicion and even hatred. If something bad happened, people looked to the Bible for an explanation and often believed they were being punished for their sins.

Religion and medical science
Because the Church controlled every aspect of education, the training received by medieval doctors had to be in accordance with religious teachings. All medical education carried out in universities was strictly in line with the beliefs of ancient physicians such as Hippocrates and Galen. No new research was permitted because it was believed that the ancient teachings were complete and could not be contradicted. In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII prohibited the cutting up of corpses, so any attempt to study human anatomy was virtually impossible. This meant that even the most educated doctors had very little knowledge of human anatomy, making treatment of sickness difficult and any form of surgery almost impossible.

Source 1
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, shown in this twelfth-century manuscript, represented Famine, Plague, War and Death. They were seen as a sign of God’s punishment and that the end of the world was near.

Source 2
This late thirteenth-century illustration of the human body was meant to display the flow of blood through the body.
Doctors and priests

It is clear that in medieval Europe, medicine took second place to religion. Priests were considered to be more important than doctors in the treatment of the sick. When dealing with an ill person, the priest always took the lead — the doctor was permitted to assist only once the praying was finished. If the patient was an important or wealthy person, the doctor might wait while a whole group of churchmen offered up prayers before being granted access. If the disease was working quickly, the doctor might not even get to examine the patient until after they died. It is not surprising then that doctors were powerless to deal with a pandemic such as the Black Death.

Religious conflict

By the beginning of the fourteenth century, virtually all of western Europe was Roman Catholic. The Arabic conquests during the seventh century and onwards, and the later expansion of the Ottoman Empire, meant that most of the Middle East and North Africa followed Islam. Christians and Muslims looked at each other with suspicion, largely as a result of the Crusades and of the efforts of Spanish Christians to recapture Spain from Muslim control. Since both religions viewed illness as a form of divine punishment, the people of each religion blamed the other for the Black Death when it ravaged their people. Christians also treated Jews very poorly as they blamed the Jews for the death of Christ. When the Black Death struck, evidence suggests that European Christians blamed it on the Jews.

Did you know?

Superstitious minds looked everywhere for a cause of the Black Death. Astrologers said that the alignment of the planets Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the house of Aquarius in 1345 was to blame. An alignment of Saturn and Jupiter was supposed to bring death and disaster, while an alignment of Mars and Jupiter was said to cause disease. The alignment of all three planets could only mean a huge catastrophe was imminent.

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

1. What was the attitude of the medieval Church towards medical science?
2. Why was there suspicion between Christians and Muslims during the Middle Ages?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

3. Examine Source 1. What does this tell us about the medieval explanation for events such as famine and plague?
4. Identify two inaccuracies in the diagram of the body shown in Source 2. What prevented medieval doctors from finding out more about the human body?
5. In what ways could the activity depicted in Source 3 actually hinder medical treatment for illness?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

6. From the information in Source 4, what do you think was the attitude of the Scots towards the English? How did their religious beliefs influence their actions?
11.5 Trade and the spread of disease

The early fourteenth century was a time of rapid expansion of trade between Europe, North Africa and Asia. Wherever people traded, black rats and their disease-carrying fleas followed. Disease that had previously been confined to an area in Central Asia soon spread to populations that had no immunity to its ravages.

Human settlement in the fourteenth century

As we have learned, the early medieval era was a period in which many nomadic groups moved through Europe and Asia, invading new land. Through the Middle Ages, most of these nomadic groups gradually settled in the lands they had conquered, establishing permanent villages and towns as the centres of agricultural activity. Warriors such as the Franks, Magyars and Goths became farmers, while seafaring raiders such as the Vikings and Danes came to use their ships for peaceful trade. By the fourteenth century, most of Europe, southern and eastern Asia and much of northern Africa was subject to permanent human settlement. Only in the northern and central regions of Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa was the nomadic lifestyle still prevalent.

The growth of trade

Settled civilisations in Europe, and Asian empires such as those in India and China were quick to realise the benefits of peaceful trade. Networks of overland trade roads developed throughout Europe and Asia, connecting the rapidly growing towns and leading to the growth of some towns as major trading centres. These towns would regularly hold fairs to allow merchants to display and sell their wares. Major commercial city-states such as Genoa and Venice sent ships throughout the Mediterranean and to western and northern European ports. Trade between Europe and

Did you know?

Some historians believe that fleas carrying the Black Death came to Caffa on the skins of marmots. These small Central Asian mammals had no resistance to the disease, and large numbers became infected and died in the mid 1340s. Fur traders came across the dead animals, removed their hides (including the deadly fleas) and sent them along the Silk Road to cities such as Caffa.
Asia expanded rapidly along the Silk Road, with China and many other centres through central Asia coming into regular contact with European merchants.

Outbreak in Asia
Written reports indicate that outbreaks of the Black Death may have occurred in China in the 1320s and 1330s. The province of Hubei in central China is considered by many to be the location of the first major outbreak in 1334. It was here that the Black Death first appeared in its most deadly form. In the fourteenth century, China was largely ruled by the Mongols, who had strong links to Central Asia, so they may have brought the disease with them to China. At the same time trade between China and a number of European states was increasing from access along the Silk Road. The potential was always there for the Black Death to be carried to Europe, either by European traders returning from the east or by the Central Asian Tartar warriors (Mongols) who were continuing their attacks in eastern Europe.

The siege of Caffa
In the thirteenth century, the Italian trading city of Genoa had taken control of Caffa, on the Crimean Peninsula, in modern-day Ukraine. Caffa was a major shipping port for trade throughout the Black Sea. In 1347 the Tartars attacked the city. They were supported by Genoa’s bitter rivals, the Venetians, who had previously controlled Caffa. As they laid siege to the city, the Tartars began to fall sick from a serious disease and large numbers died in a very short time. Unable to maintain the siege, the Tartars began to withdraw; but before they did, they began catapulting the diseased bodies of their dead over the walls and into the city. The Genoans who escaped from Caffa soon found they were carrying the deadly disease. Venetian traders who had been present during the siege were also infected and both groups carried the Black Death deep into the heart of Europe (see Source 2).

How important was Caffa in the spread of the Black Death?
Trade links between Asia and Europe were developing so strongly during the fourteenth century that Caffa was probably not the only source of the Black Death coming to Europe, as Messina first recorded the plague shortly before the siege of Caffa. Nevertheless, the rapid spread to places that engaged in trade with Caffa suggests that it was very important in hastening the infection into Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. During the last few months of 1347, the disease was carried to Constantinople, the southern shores of the Black Sea, Alexandria in Egypt and the islands of Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia in the Mediterranean. Most of this spread appears to have originated in Caffa.
The spread through Europe

By January 1348, cases of the plague were reported in both Genoa and Venice in northern Italy. From there it quickly spread to the rest of Italy, and to southern France and Spain by middle of that year. Within a year all of western Europe was affected and, by 1350, the Black Death had turned east again and had reached Russia. Source 4 shows how quickly the Black Death spread throughout Europe between the end of 1347 and 1351.

Infestation through the Middle East

The plague appears to have come to the Middle East through several different routes. During 1347, warriors returning to Baghdad from battle at Tabriz in northern Persia (now Iran) found that they had brought the disease with them. These soldiers would have carried supplies of grain with them for food. Not only did black rats infest the grain supplies but the fleas carrying the disease would also have been able to survive on grain debris. The area that includes modern-day Iraq, as well as Syria and southern Turkey, was soon ravaged by the Black Death. It is also believed that Muslim pilgrims coming to Mecca from northern India via the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea may have been transporting rats from Central Asia to the Arabian Peninsula, bringing the plague with them. The Egyptian city of Alexandria was a major trading port on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. It had strong links with Constantinople, as well as with Arab cities to the east and all along the north African coast. Alexandria became infected in 1347, soon after the siege of Caffa. The Black Death then spread eastwards to Palestine and Syria in 1348, and into the Arabian peninsula, reaching Mecca.

North Africa

From Alexandria, the plague began to spread along the north African coast, and had reached Tripoli in modern Libya by 1348. At the about the same time, the city of Tunis appears to have been infected through its trade with Sicily, with an outbreak reported in April 1348. From Tunis, the plague spread eastwards into Libya, with that country now attacked by the plague from both east and west. In 1348, the ruler of Morocco attempted to conquer Tunis, but failed, and his retreating army carried the disease back to Morocco, infecting Algeria along the way. The plague reached Marrakesh in central Morocco in 1349. It is possible that Morocco was also infected by traders from Spain, bringing the disease via the island of Majorca.

From Alexandria, the plague also spread south along the Nile valley, although it does not appear to spread into other parts of Africa. It appears that settled areas with towns and agriculture provided the most suitable environment for black rats to thrive. The area to the south of Egypt and the Sahara was inhabited largely by nomadic tribes. Their lifestyle did not provide an environment suitable for the rats, so the plague did not spread into these parts of Africa.
EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

1 Outline the areas of Europe, Asia and the Middle East that had become permanent human settlements by the fourteenth century.

2 Where did the Black Death first appear in the deadly form that eventually devastated Europe, the Middle East and North Africa?

3 Why was the city of Caffa important in the spread of the Black Death?

4 Why did the Black Death primarily affect settled communities rather than people living a nomadic existence?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

5 Examine Source 2. Why were the cities of Constantinople, Alexandria, Venice and Genoa among the first to be infected after the siege of Caffa?

6 How did the Tartars in Source 3 spread disease into the city of Caffa?

7 Using Source 4, identify when each of the following cities was infected by the Black Death: London; Paris; Hamburg; Dublin; Marseilles.

8 Using Source 5, identify three different routes by which the Black Death came to the Middle East and northern Africa.

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH

9 Using the internet and your library, find out all you can about the Silk Road, including the answers to the following:
   a Where did the Silk Road begin and end, and which regions or countries did it pass through?
   b When was the earliest recorded use of the Silk Road for trade?
   c What were the main goods traded along the Silk Road?
   d Why was the Silk Road so significant in spreading the plague?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

10 One historian has suggested that without trade, the Black Death may never have happened. Explain whether or not you agree with this statement. Give evidence to support your opinion.

CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS

11 What is a pandemic? Explain why it is appropriate to refer to the Black Death as a pandemic.
11.6 How did people respond to the Black Death?

The strength and speed of the Black Death pandemic caught everyone in its path off guard. Medical science had no way of dealing with the outbreak and religious beliefs provided no protection against the onslaught.

Medical treatments

Medieval doctors had no idea what had caused the Black Death and so they resorted to the traditional methods of treating illness. As mentioned previously, bloodletting and the use of leeches were tried and failed. Attempts to cut into the buboes to remove the ‘bad’ blood often did little more than help spread the disease by exposing the doctors to the bacteria living in the blood. A common belief was that disease came from miasma, or the bad smells that were often found in overcrowded towns. To counter this, doctors often encouraged their patients to sniff posies of fragrant flowers, bundles of herbs or sweet-smelling oils. In some cases, they even suggested that patients should breathe in the smell of human waste in the hope that one bad smell might overcome the more dangerous miasma.

Doctors themselves began dressing in long hooded robes to protect themselves from infection. They would also wear a face mask that had a long beak-like structure at the front (see spread 4.16). This beak would contain sweet smelling herbs or oils, designed to filter any evil smells that the doctor might be exposed to.

Some towns resorted to the ‘cure of sound’. They would loudly ring the church bells, or fire off cannons, in the hope that the noise would frighten the plague and drive it away. In addition to prayer, spells and charms of all sorts were tried in the hope of driving away the evil. These included washing the skin with vinegar and rose water, or applying a mixture of tree resin, white lily roots and dried human excrement to buboes that had been cut open.
Some effective treatments

The most successful measures taken to avoid the plague were those that involved forms of quarantine. In Venice, disease-carrying ships were quarantined on a number of small islands in the lagoon, away from the main city. In Milan, houses found to contain the plague were walled up to prevent anyone going in or out. These methods did not completely stop the disease, but both of these cities had lower death rates from the plague than many others. In the French city of Avignon, Pope Clement VI sat between two large fires designed to purify the air. In fact, the plague bacteria cannot survive intense heat, and fleas also dislike heat, so this method may well have been the most effective. For many people, simply fleeing an infected town or village was the best form of protection, although it was usually only the wealthy who could take advantage of this.

Religious responses

Followers of all religions saw the Black Death as a punishment from God. Christians, who believed they were being punished for their sins, turned to prayer and carried out pilgrimages to holy places in the hope of warding off the disease. When the plague hit Mecca in 1348, devout Muslims believed it was God’s punishment for allowing non-believers to enter the city. In some places, religious authorities and town councils imposed tight restrictions on people’s behaviour in the hope of keeping the plague at bay. In the French city of Tournai, men and women living together but who were not married were ordered to marry or to separate, and gambling, swearing and working on the Sabbath were banned.

‘Bring out your dead!’

So large was the death toll from the Black Death that all the usual religious rituals associated with death could rarely be observed. As many as half the priests died from the plague and many others fled, making the situation worse. In 1348, Pope Clement VI decreed that those who were infected could make their confessions to each other, including to a woman, if no priest was available. Collection of corpses took place every night, with most buried in mass graves on the outskirts of the town. Very rarely was a proper funeral service held for those who had died.

Monks and monasteries

Throughout Catholic Europe, monasteries had become important centres of learning, and many had schools attached. The monks made an important contribution to the life of the surrounding community and were often the first ones that people would turn to in times of trouble. Because the monks saw it as their duty to tend to the sick, they quickly caught the disease and numbers in the monasteries were reduced. In the period after the Black Death, many inexperienced and poorly trained monks moved into the monasteries, reducing their influence as places of learning.
Blaming the Jews

Throughout Europe, people looked for someone to blame for their misfortune, and suspicion quickly fell on the Jews. They were suspected of having poisoned the air or of infecting the wells from which people drew their drinking water. In some towns Jews were tortured mercilessly until they confessed to poisoning the wells. In other towns, Jews were herded into buildings which were then burned to the ground. Synagogues were destroyed and many Jews put to the sword. Despite Pope Clement issuing a decree declaring the Jews innocent, the persecution continued from 1348 until the early 1350s throughout most of Europe.

The Flagellants

One religious group that responded very publicly to the spread of the plague was a group known as the Flagellants. They believed that whipping themselves with steel-tipped whips would show their willingness to be punished for their sins, and win God’s favour. The Flagellants are believed to have originated in the eleventh century and had undertaken pilgrimages across Europe in the 1260s. The onset of the Black Death drew many new followers to their brotherhood, and they travelled from town to town across Europe, whipping themselves until they bled. In reality, they were probably helping to spread the disease. Many of them carried the disease in their blood, and they often brought the disease-carrying rats and fleas with them as they travelled.
Activities

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
1. What did many people in the Middle Ages believe to be the cause of disease?
2. Identify and explain three ‘medical’ treatments that were recommended for dealing with the plague.
3. Explain the purpose of the costume worn by doctors during the period of the Black Death.
4. Why would the actions taken by the Pope probably have helped to protect him from the plague?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
5. Use the information in Source 1 to write your own description of the buboes that were symptoms of the plague.
6. Examine Source 2. Why was this activity potentially so dangerous for both the patient and the doctor?
7. What does Source 3 tell us about the importance of religion in medieval life? How did religious authorities respond to the threat of the plague?
8. Normally, the Catholic Church allowed only priests to administer the last rites to a dying person. Why would the woman in Source 4 have been permitted to carry out this role?
9. How do we know that the people being burned in Source 5 were Jews?
10. What were the Flagellants, as depicted in Source 6, hoping to achieve through their activities?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS
11. In addition to the fire burning the village in Source 4, there appears to be lightning coming from the sky above the village. Why do you think the artist included this lightning in the engraving?
12. Imagine that you are the mayor of a town that has just begun to be affected by the plague. Draw up an illustrated notice to advise the townspeople of measures they should take to treat plague symptoms. Base this advice on the beliefs held at the time.

HISTORICAL QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH
13. Using the internet and your library, find out all you can about the persecution of the Jews in medieval Europe, particularly during the Black Death. In particular, search for answers to the following:
   a. why Jews were treated as outsiders at this time
   b. examples of restrictions that were placed on Jews in different countries
   c. at least one other incident when Jews were deliberately targeted for persecution.
11.7 How did the Black Death change society?

Between 1347 and 1351, the Black Death had a brutal effect on life in Europe and the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Despite all the devastation, there were also some positive changes in the following years, many of which occurred as a direct response to the horrors of the plague.

Changes to medicine

The failure of medieval medicine to successfully treat the victims of the plague led to changes in the practice of medicine in the years following the Black Death. Before this time, hospitals were places where sick people were sent to be isolated. When people entered a hospital, all their possessions were disposed of because no-one expected them to survive. During the period of the Black Death, doctors began to try to cure patients placed in hospital, and this practice continued after the plague had gone. Some hospitals began to develop relationships with universities and collect libraries of medical texts. An increased emphasis on medical knowledge led to more dissections of human corpses, and so improvements in the knowledge of anatomy and surgical practices soon followed.

Sanitation and public health

In a number of places, authorities became more aware of the need to take responsibility for the health of the population. In Italian cities such as Venice and Milan, public health boards were set up to deal with the plague, and these continued after the disease had moved on. These boards gradually gained extra powers and became a valuable means of preventing the spread of illness. In London, the city council brought in regulations to clean up the city. Laws to prevent littering, the employment of street sweepers and heavy fines for dumping waste in the river were all implemented in the years following the Black Death.

Religion

The devastation of the Black Death weakened the influence of the previously all-powerful Catholic Church. The inability of religious leaders to deal with the plague through prayer and the fact that so many priests had died of the disease led to many people losing some respect for the Church. In the 1360s and 1370s, an English theologian John Wycliffe wrote a number of works critical of the papacy and of the role of monasteries in society. He gained a strong following among people whose recent experiences had led them to question the power and influence of the Catholic Church in society. Many of Wycliffe’s followers were executed for heresy.

Political unrest

The huge decline in the numbers of peasants and agricultural workers meant there were fewer people left to perform these tasks. This meant that peasants were able to demand higher wages. However, these demands were often resisted by those in power. Peasants and workers in various parts of Europe rose up to demand their rights in the years following the Black Death.
In France in 1358, a group of workers called the Jacquerie rose up in revolt to try and improve their working conditions. In 1378 a group of workers in the wool industry, who were known as the ciompi, led a revolt in Florence where they managed to force some democratic government reforms for a brief time. In England, causes of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 (see chapter 4) can be traced back to the changes in society that resulted from the Black Death.

**Language**

In England before the Black Death, most educated people spoke Latin or French. The death of large numbers of educated monks and other scholars meant that schools had to resort to English as the language of instruction. By the 1380s, poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer were publishing their works in what is now referred to as Middle English (see Source 3). Chaucer is considered by many to be the father of English literature.

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. How did the experience of the Black Death change the ways in which hospitals operated?
2. Describe an example of action taken in London to improve sanitation and public health after the plague had moved on.
3. Why did many people begin to lose respect for the Church after the Black Death?

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

4. **a** Describe what is happening in Source 1.
   
   **b** List the differences in the way this activity is depicted in the source compared with how it would be performed today.

5. **a** What appears to be happening in Source 2 and why did this event take place?
   
   **b** Where else did similar uprisings take place?

6. The extract from a poem by Chaucer in Source 3 is written in what we now call Middle English. Although it is a form of the language that is unfamiliar to us, it is still recognisable as English.
   
   **a** Identify the words in the poem that are the same as modern English words.
   
   **b** Identify the words that are similar to modern English words and give their equivalent.
   
   **c** List any words that seem completely unrecognisable. Suggest possible meanings for these words based on the context.
   
   **d** After analysing the language, summarise what you think this poem is about.

**CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

7. The ciompi in Italy managed to gain some ‘democratic’ reforms in the government of their city. Give an example of what you think might be a ‘democratic’ reform.

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**Source 3**

The decline in the use of Latin and French in England led to increased use of a form of English, such as in this extract of a poem by Chaucer.

And whom I sawgh he wolde never fine
To reden on this cursed book al night,
Al sodeinly three leves have I plight
Out of his book right as he redde, and eke
I with my fist so took him on the cheeke
That in oure fir he fil backward adown.
And up he sterte as dooth a wood leon
And with his fist he smoot me on the heed
That in the floor I lay as I were deed.
And whan he sawgh how stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde have fled his way,
Till atte laste out of my swough I braide:
“O hastou slain me, false thief?”
I saide,
“And for my land thus hastou mordred me?
“Er I be deed, yit wol I kisse thee.”
Weakening the feudal system

The dominant form of social and economic organisation in Europe in the Middle Ages was the feudal system. The massive drop in population that occurred as a result of the Black Death was to change the relationship between landowners and those who worked the land. This change severely weakened the feudal system in the following decades.

Huge decline in population

It is estimated that approximately 25 million people died in Europe during the period of the Black Death. This represents a decline in the population of between thirty and fifty per cent in the years 1347 to 1351. The earlier outbreak in Hubei, China is said to have caused the death of 5 million, or 90 per cent of the population. Later outbreaks in China in 1353–54 are believed to have killed almost two-thirds of the Chinese population. In the Middle East the effects seem to have been less devastating, although still very significant. It has been estimated that less than one-third of the population was killed by the plague across the Middle East, although some local areas suffered a higher death rate.

New power for the peasants

Under the feudal system, peasants had been tied to the land and were expected to work the land their families had worked for generations before. The sudden loss of millions of peasants across Europe left many estates with insufficient numbers to work the land. This led to some wealthy landowners offering increased payment to agricultural labourers in other areas to entice them to their estates. Peasants suddenly found they had bargaining power, and in some places wages doubled in the space of one year. At the same time, prices fell for many goods because the number of customers had declined so dramatically. The decrease in available farm workers led many land holders to move away from growing crops and to increase the keeping of livestock, such as sheep and cattle, as this required fewer farm workers.

Changes in the social class structure

Under the traditional feudal system peasants had kept part of the crop as payment for their labour. By the end of the fourteenth century money wages became a more significant part of peasant earnings. This often meant that peasants and their families had money to spend on goods that had previously been available only to the wealthy. As the population began to recover, there was a gradual rise in the number of people becoming merchants and shopkeepers in response to this increase in demand.

Skilled trades open up

Before the Black Death most of the skilled craftsmen and tradesmen such as bakers, blacksmiths and stonemasons had entered their trades because of family connections. The huge death toll meant that many craftsmen had to look outside their own families for apprentices to train. This often led to the sons of peasants gaining access to a trade and the potential wealth and status this would bring.

Growth in the middle class

Previously, society had been made up primarily of a wealthy landowning upper class and a relatively poor peasant lower class. The increase in the number of people involved in business, crafts and trades brought about the growth of a middle class, particularly in some of the rapidly growing towns. Many historians believe the increasing importance of the middle class in some European countries occurred more quickly because of the Black Death.

Did you know?

In some parts of Europe, kings and aristocrats were alarmed by the growth of the middle class and the increased wealth of some of the peasant class. They passed ‘sumptuary laws’, which regulated the type of clothing that peasants were allowed to wear. This was to prevent peasants from using their newfound wealth to begin dressing and behaving as if they were members of the upper classes.
An opposing view

In recent years, some historians have suggested that the changes to the feudal system and growth of the middle class would have happened without the Black Death. They argue that the population was in decline before 1347 because of crop failures and famine. They also point out that the plague returned to Europe many times over the next three hundred years. Although these later incidents did not bring such a high death toll in as short a time, they did keep the population low. Some historians argue that the effects of the Black Death from 1347 to 1351 have been exaggerated in previous historical studies.

**EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION**

1. What proportion of the population is estimated to have died during the Black Death in:
   a. Europe
   b. China
   c. the Middle East?

2. How did the decline in population open up opportunities for peasants who had previously been tied to one estate under the feudal system?

3. In what ways did farming practice change after the Black Death?

**ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES**

4. How does the Black Death appear to have contributed to the development of markets, such as that shown in Source 1? How would you describe the people at this market?

5. Examine Source 2. Why did access to apprenticeships become possible for members of the peasant class after the Black Death? How do we know that the tradesman depicted has a prosperous business?

**CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS**

6. What do we mean when we refer to a ‘middle class’ in medieval society?

7. Give four examples of occupations that would have been carried out by middle class people during the Late Middle Ages.

**PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS**

8. From the information in this spread, and from what you have learned about the Middle Ages this year, how important do you think the Black Death was in the weakening of the feudal system and the growth of the middle class in late medieval Europe?

**Definition**

*middle class* a class of people who traditionally fit in between a rich upper class and a working class. In medieval European society, this was the group in between the landowning aristocracy and the peasants or labourers who worked the land. They were usually small landowners or people involved in trade and commerce.
Recognising different perspectives

What is perspective in history?
Perspective refers to a particular point of view. When studying historical sources, it is important to identify the perspective of the authors of each of those sources. Sometimes different sources will contradict each other, which can make it confusing when trying to find out what actually happened. If we can understand more about the person who produced the source, we can recognise the beliefs or understanding they may have had that could have influenced their point of view. Also, the way we view events today may be quite different from the way people viewed events in the past.

Note: We use the term ‘author’ to refer to anyone who has produced a historical source. Works of art can have a perspective just as well as written sources.

Why is it important to recognise different perspectives?
It is almost impossible for anyone to write about history without having a particular perspective. Their personal experiences and background will influence the way in which they interpret and record an event. This applies to both primary and secondary sources. The more we know about the author of a source, the more likely we are to take this into account when making judgements about the accuracy of that source. This can help us to gain a more complete view of the past.

How do we identify or recognise different perspectives?
Recognising different perspectives is a useful skill to master. The following are the types of questions you should ask about the authors of historical sources:

- **Who wrote the source, and where is that author from?** The more we know about the person providing the source, the better we are able to identify that person’s perspective.
- **Who was the author writing for?** It is important to know the intended audience for the source. Was the author simply writing for their own records, as in a diary, or were they trying to convince another person?
- **What do we know about the background of the author?** The author’s character is important in determining the value of the source. For example, was he or she an ambitious person attempting to influence an important official? To what extent was the author actually involved in the events — or was he or she simply an observer?
- **Can the author’s point of view be trusted?** Some authors may have something personal to gain by presenting only one side of an issue. They may have a particular reputation, or a place in society to protect, or ideas and beliefs they are trying to promote. Some authors will have enemies whose reputations they wish to discredit.

An example of how to recognise different perspectives

Source 1 is typical of the level of knowledge about the plague in fourteenth-century Europe.

Source 1
I say, then, that the years of the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God had attained to the number of one thousand three hundred and forty-eight [In 1348], when into the notable city of Florence, fair over every other of Italy, there came to death-dealing pestilence, which, through the operation of the heavenly bodies or of our own iniquitous [evil] doings, being sent down upon mankind for our correction by the just wrath of God, had some years before appeared in the parts of the East and after having bereft these latter of an innumerable number of inhabitants, extending without cease from one place to another, had now unhappily spread towards the West.

We can use the questions outlined above to understand the author’s perspective before we try to analyse the source.

- **Who wrote the source, and where is that author from?** The source was written by Giovanni Boccaccio, an important fourteenth-century Italian author.
- **Who was the author writing for?** The Decameron was a work of fiction, so Boccaccio was writing for a wide audience. At the time only the relatively wealthy could read, so he was aiming his writing at the middle and upper classes. In one sense, he probably hoped he would entertain them.
• **What do we know about the background of the author?** Boccaccio came from a prosperous background and mixed socially with the wealthy members of society in Florence and Naples.

• **Can the author’s point of view be trusted?** Because the *Decameron* is a work of fiction, the stories contained within it are not necessarily true. However, it is believed that Boccaccio based many of the characters in the book on real people living at the time. His understanding of the causes of the Black Death would have been fairly consistent with beliefs of the time. It would not make sense for him to describe something too different from the experiences of his readers. We also know that his descriptions of the symptoms of the plague and people’s reaction to it in other parts of the *Decameron* are consistent with the descriptions by other authors.

**Developing my skills**

Examine (Sources 2 and 3) and answer the questions about author perspective for yourself. Then answer the following question:

*How does the difference in the perspective of the two authors help us to understand the Black Death and the society it affected?*

---

**Source 2**

Modern medical opinion from ‘Prevention of Plague: Recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention’

Recommended means of reducing the risk for acquiring plague in and around homes include:

(a) eliminating sources of food and shelter for rodents near homes,
(b) modifying homes to prevent rodent access,
(c) treating domestic dogs and cats weekly with appropriate insecticides,
(d) avoiding direct contact with sick or dead rodents, and
(e) handling severely ill cats with extreme caution (these animals should be examined by a veterinarian).

---

**Source 3**

Adapted from the *Paris Consilium*, a document written by 49 medical professors at the University of Paris in October 1348 at the request of King Philip VI of France. The king was seeking an explanation for the plague.

The celestial cause [of the plague] has come from the conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter, and Mars, under the moist sign of Aquarius, that occurred most recently in the year of Our Lord 1345, following both solar and lunar eclipses. According to Albert the Great, the conjunction of Jupiter and Mars will bring plague. The planet Jupiter is hot and wet — the qualities that bring rotting and putrefaction, harbingers of the plague.

The earthly cause [of the plague] is the poisoning of the air from noxious gases that arise from earthquakes. Further unfortunate conjunctions of constellations have brought on thunder, rain, and wet south winds that have dispersed the poisonous vapours caused by carcasses rotting in swamps. As the poisoned air has entered the body, it has contaminated the heart, and thus the body’s vital spirit, causing its organs to rot.

No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no pig, no old beef, altogether no fat meat . . . It is injurious [harmful] to sleep during the daytime . . . Fish should not be eaten, too much exercise may be injurious . . . and nothing should be cooked in rainwater. Olive oil with food is deadly . . . Bathing is dangerous . . .’

---

**Source 4**

An image of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacteria modern science now knows causes the bubonic plague.
In this chapter we have explored the Black Death and the way in which it devastated Europe, Asia and North Africa during the fourteenth century, particularly between 1347 and 1351. We have learned that the Black Death was a combination of three related diseases — bubonic plague, pulmonary/pneumonic plague and septicaemic plague. We have also learned about the effects the plague had on medieval society, including living conditions, science, religion and the feudal system.

The plague returned to Europe in the 1360s, but this time with a much lower death rate. It continued to reappear at regular intervals throughout different parts of Europe for the next four hundred years, although never with the huge death toll suffered during that brief period from 1347 to 1351.

Analysis and use of sources

1. Examine Source 1.
   a. Approximately how many people were killed by the Black Death in England?
   b. What evidence is there that the plague returned to England regularly over the next three hundred years?
   c. Approximately how long did it take for the English population to recover to the level it had reached before the Black Death?
   d. The statistics in Source 1 are estimates based on records in parishes where reliable records were kept. These statistics assume other parishes without reliable data had similar death rates. Do you think this is a good method for estimating population growth? Give reasons for your answer.
   e. Do the figures in the table support the view of historians that the Black Death weakened the feudal system? Explain your answer.

2. Examine Source 2.
   a. What is the name usually given to the artistic theme presented in this painting?
   b. What do the skeleton-like figures represent?
   c. Which social class do you think each person in the painting might belong to? Give a reason for your answer.
   d. What message does the painting convey about medieval European religious beliefs?
   e. Why did paintings of this type become more common after the Black Death?

Historical questions and research

1. Using the internet and your library, identify three dates when the plague again appeared in a region of Europe. For each date, identify:
   a. which regions or countries were affected
   b. how many people are believed to have been killed on each occasion.
2. Using the internet and your library, find out when was the last time a major plague pandemic affected each of the following countries:
   a. England
   b. France
   c. Italy
   d. China.
11.10 Review and reflect

Chapter 11: The Black Death — a 14th century plague

Estimates based on parish records

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Population (millions)</th>
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Back to the big questions

At the beginning of this chapter several big questions were posed. Use the knowledge you have gained to answer these questions.

1. What was the Black Death, and how did it cause the death of so many people?
2. How did fourteenth-century living conditions and the state of medical knowledge leave the population defenceless against serious disease?
3. Why did the Black Death break out when it did, and where did it spread?
4. How did people attempt to deal with the disease?
5. What were the consequences of the Black Death in Europe and other parts of the world?

Think about your learning over this topic. For each of these statements, tick the box you think best reflects your learning and briefly state your reasons.

<table>
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<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Reasons why I agree or disagree</th>
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<td>I understand how people’s religious beliefs influenced the way they responded to the Black Death.</td>
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<td>I found out some things about medieval medicine that surprised me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I discovered that the Black Death led to some major changes in people’s lives.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would not like to have lived in medieval times.</td>
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