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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

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10.9 Short-term impacts of the Black Death

Many of the immediate impacts of the Black Death on **society** were the result of death on a massive scale. People from all walks of life, all trades and professions were affected, as were all types of families.

Depopulation

It is difficult to give an exact figure for the number of people who died from the Black Death. Many medieval authors made claims about the number of deaths that occurred in particular areas, but these sources have proven unreliable. Church records also provide us with details about births and deaths in their particular region, but these records also contain many gaps and inaccuracies, and are therefore also unreliable. Many of the **primary sources** that exist do not distinguish between deaths caused by the Black Death and deaths that occurred because of other factors, such as old age or other diseases.

The effects of the Black Death on Eastern societies are not understood as well as they are in Europe. It is believed that in China alone the population dropped from 125 million to 90 million. It is known that

the plague spread into other regions of Asia besides China, including the Khmer region and India. A writer from the period is reported as saying: 'India was depopulated; Tartary, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia were covered with dead bodies; the Kurds fled in vain to the mountains. In Caramaria and Caesaria [in modern-day Turkey] none were left alive.'

The most recent estimates suggest the following approximate number of deaths as a result of the Black Death:

- 33 to 40 per cent of the population of Europe, with higher rates of death in rural areas
- 35 million people in China
- one-third of populations in the Middle East
- 40 per cent of Egypt's population.

The effect on towns

Rubbish and raw sewage in the streets of medieval towns was a common sight, even before the plague, but once the plague struck, this filthy situation became even worse. Abandoned houses were left dirty and untended, and muck in the streets piled up. There were few people to tend to the disrepair, even if they had wanted to. Tradesmen and craftsmen died along with cleaners, magistrates and officials.

Impact on religion

Many monks, nuns and priests died as a result of the Black Death. Some others in the general population saw this as proof that the lifestyles of these religious people had displeased God. A few religious centres, such as monasteries, were accused of improper conduct and greed, rather than being places devoted to God. Some priests

Source 1 An illustration from the Toggenburg Bible (1411) showing a couple covered in buboes, symptoms of the Black Death



and other religious figures fled, abandoning their parishioners because they feared becoming infected. Those who replaced them were often poorly trained. Some did not even live in the parishes they were meant to oversee. This added to the disappointment and anger of many ordinary people toward the Church and weakened its position in society.

Burial of the dead

People were dying so quickly, and in such large numbers, that there was no time for proper burials or religious ceremonies. In fact, some Christian priests began refusing to bury victims for fear of contracting the disease. Mass burials became common, with corpses shovelled into large pits and covered with earth.



Source 2 This medieval painting shows nuns caring for the sick at the Hôtel-Dieu (Hospital of God) in Paris. Many nuns and monks contracted the plague by helping others.

keyconcept: Evidence

The Decameron

One of the most significant primary sources of evidence for an insight into how the Black Death affected societies in Europe is *The Decameron*. It was written by Giovanni Boccaccio in the 1350s. Although it was written as entertainment (it consists of a number of lively stories told by young people who flee Florence to escape the plague), it provides key information about life in plague-affected communities.

Source 3

Some thought that moderate living and the avoidance of all superfluity [excesses] would preserve them from the epidemic ... they shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick, eating the finest food and drinking the best wine very temperately [moderately], avoiding all excess, allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness ... others thought just the opposite. They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink

and be merry, to go about singing and amusing themselves, satisfying every appetite they could, laughing and jesting [joking] ...

Many others adopted a course of life midway ... they did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands, in the belief that it was an excellent thing to comfort the brain with such odours; for the whole air was infected with the smell of dead bodies, of sick persons and medicines.

... brother abandoned brother, and the uncle his nephew, and the sister her brother, and very often the wife her husband. What is even worse and nearly incredible is that fathers and mothers refused to see and tend their children.

A translated extract from *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375)

For more information on the key concept of evidence, refer to page 187 of 'The history toolkit'.

Check your learning 10.9

Remember and understand

- 1 Why is it so difficult to give an exact figure for the number of deaths resulting from the Black Death?
- 2 Explain how the plague led to a loss of confidence in the Church for some medieval Christians.

Evaluate and create

- 3 Carefully read Source 3. In dot points, summarise some of the major effects of the Black Death on people's lives in plague-affected communities as described in this source.

10.11 Long-term impacts of the Black Death

It is often only with the passage of time that the long-term impacts of devastating events become clear, and the Black Death was no exception. The Black Death reduced the populations of towns, villages, cities and manors dramatically. In some cases the populations of whole towns were wiped out, leaving the countryside empty. Europe would not recover until the 1500s.

Weakening of feudalism

The massive drop in population drastically affected trade, manufacturing, and the production of food from the land. Skilled labourers and craftsmen were now in short supply. Survivors who had been trained in different trades were highly valued by employers. They had more bargaining power and, hence, more social status.

In time, this situation helped to break down the already weakened system of feudalism. Instead of providing their labour free in return for a lord's protection and support, knights and manor workers could now demand money for their services. In towns, workers could demand higher wages.

The wealth available to survivors of the Black Death is believed to have been at least five times more than it was before the plague struck. Spending increased in towns and cities, increasing the power and social position of surviving members of the middle class. Prices also began to increase in some areas.

Peasant unrest

Concerned by the increase in wages being demanded (and paid), some rulers tried to introduce new laws to keep wages low. They also tried to stop the rising cost of food, then being forced up by black market trading and piracy.

In England, the Statute of Labourers was introduced in 1351. This law made it illegal for employers to increase workers' wages to attract new

keyconcept: Cause and effect

The Peasants' Revolt

The Peasants' Revolt took place in England in 1381. This revolt, which involved separate but related uprisings by peasants, eventually led to the end of feudalism in England.

The lower classes under feudalism were often badly treated. They lived in complete poverty and were enslaved to their lords. Despite their poverty, peasants in England at this time were required to pay taxes to support the king.

By then, the Black Death had severely reduced the population of England, but the king passed a law to ensure that workers could not ask for better employment terms (such as higher wages). When some peasants refused to pay these taxes, they were fined or put in the stocks as punishment. But the discontent was felt in many places, and an uprising swelled across England. The leader of the revolt, Wat Tyler, was eventually killed by the mayor of London.

Although the demands for better working and living conditions were not immediately met, the upper classes realised that they could not rule over the peasants in the same ways they had in the past. They also realised that large groups of workers could be a significant political force to reckon with.

For more information on the key concept of cause and effect, refer to page 186 of 'The history toolkit'.



Source 1 An illustration of Wat Tyler being killed during the Peasants' Revolt



Source 2 A detail from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican City in Rome, painted by Michelangelo (1475–1564) – one of the more significant works of art from Renaissance Europe

workers. It also made it illegal for workers to travel to other areas for better wages. This law upset many peasant workers. Indeed, it created some of the unrest that led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Weakening of the Church

The inability of religious leaders to limit the terrible effects of the plague, as well as the deaths of so many monks, nuns and priests, led to a lessening of many peoples' faith in the Church. In the aftermath of the Black Death, people began to question the influence and power that the Church had over society and to openly criticise some of its practices.

In time this would lead to a strengthening of power of the state over the Church and to movements such as the Reformation that would see the establishment of alternative Christian faiths.

Foundations of the Renaissance

After the Black Death had passed, many wealthy survivors in Europe chose to invest in art or literature as a means of expressing their gratitude for being left alive. Some became **patrons**. They funded talented individuals to create paintings, build churches and other public buildings, and to write literature. Some encouraged scientific research, hoping that answers might one day be found to what caused the Black Death. These developments added to the cultural rebirth in Europe at the time. This would later become known as the Renaissance (which means 'rebirth' in French).

The start of the slave trade

One long-term effect on African society was the start of the slave trade. The first Africans brought to Europe as slaves were captured by Portuguese captains Antão Gonçalves and Nuno Tristão in Cabo Branco (modern Mauritania) in 1441. From this point the Portuguese established a steady trade in African slaves. Just over 10 years later, the Spanish also entered the slave trade. Initially established to provide labour in Europe, as European nations began to establish colonies from the 16th century onwards the slave trade increased as labour was needed in these new lands. Africans from the Sahara region began to be taken as slaves in the 14th century, at first to boost Europe's greatly reduced labour force.

Check your learning 10.11

Remember and understand

- 1 The Statute of Labourers was introduced in 1351.
 - a How did it change conditions for workers in England?
 - b What did this law have to do with the plague?
- 2 How did some survivors of the plague help the spread of Renaissance thinking in Europe?
- 3 How can the plague be seen as a factor that led to the start of the African slave trade?

Apply and analyse

- 4 What evidence is there to suggest that the plague had a devastating effect on the population of India at the time?

Evaluate and create

- 5 Write an essay of 500 words explaining what you believe was the most important change in the society of medieval Europe as a result of the repeated outbursts of the 14th-century plague.
- 6 In small groups, role-play for the class an interchange between survivors of the Black Death and either their former lord of the manor or their former employer in a medieval town. Your conversation will focus on how things have changed (for both parties concerned) and will reflect the values and knowledge of the times.