

# Effects of the Black Death

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## The effects of the Black Death

The Black Death was of such a scale that it had massive effects on the feudal world. The plague led to a scarcity of labour and gave greater bargaining power to the peasants. From this time on, whenever the lords wanted their land to be worked the peasants were in a stronger position than before to make their wages and conditions demands clear. To whom else could the lords turn for help? The Black Death had killed so many workers that afterwards there were fewer labourers to do all the work. (This is why the feudal system persisted for longer in eastern Europe and Russia—this region was not as affected by the Black Death, nowhere near as many peasants died, so its workers did not find that they were in a position to challenge the traditional feudal order. It could be argued that the effect of this lasted until well into the twentieth century. Some villeins began to ask for payment in money wages. Those who had already been paid in money began to ask for more, sometimes double what they had previously been paid. The peasants also demanded better quality payments in kind. Their food, they said, should be fresh and of the same quality as the lord's. Some of the lords now felt they were no longer in a position to refuse their requests. As we shall see (pp. 161–3), the Peasants' Revolt helped to reinforce the peasants' bargaining position because the lords realised that they needed to compromise.

In the towns, craftsmen found themselves in a similar position. They were able to increase the price of boots, shoes and clothes, because there were far fewer people around who could make them. In England, King Edward III tried to stop these developments. He ordered that people must take the same wages as before the plague and that prices must be reduced to the old levels. But the

situation was so unstable and the people's power so great that few people took a great deal of notice.

In the villages, an ever-increasing number of lords began to allow the villeins to pay them a rent for their land, and to employ the villeins as labourers on their farms, in return for wages. In England, some villiens and lords began to group their strips of land together, to form what look like present-day farm paddocks, fenced in by hedges. Can you think of any reasons why the lords might have made these changes?