

The Black Death

John, the smith, was one of those in the 14th century who began running a high fever and whose lymph glands swelled up in his neck. Jeanne, his sister, began hemorrhaging and vomiting blood. No physician was needed to tell them what their problem was. They had the plague. There was no cure, and their life expectancy was now a few days. After their painful deaths, John and Jeanne's bodies were taken out of the house by one of the city's poor and dumped in an open grave. No one understood why they died, and being commoners, no one cared.



Friars administering the last rites to a victim of the Black Death

To the 20th century witness, their deaths were not as mysterious. The bubonic plague (Black Death) was spread because of the fleas on black rats or from contact with a person who had the disease. Ships carried the plague from the Middle East to Italy in 1347, and it quickly spread to France, Spain, England, and Russia. It killed saint and sinner, poor and rich, male and female, without much discrimination. Because cities were so overcrowded, contact with plague carriers was more common there than in rural areas, but no one was safe.

With no known way to avoid the disease, frightened people began to look for any possible solution. Some joined the flagellation movement and beat themselves until their bodies were black and blue. It was hoped that by confessing their sins and going through this self-imposed torment, God's anger would be satisfied. The movement was finally stopped by Pope Clement VI, who threatened to excommunicate the flagellants. Many rulers refused to permit their ceremonies to be performed in public.

Jews had long drunk water from moving streams rather than wells; in this time of mass fear, some charged the reason for that unusual behavior was that Jews were poisoning the wells. It did not seem to matter that Jews were also dying from the plague. Terrible slaughters of Jews took place in Strasbourg, Mainz, and other European cities.

The houses of the infected were quarantined, and no one was allowed to leave. However, some plague victims managed to escape their houses at night, and officers let them go because they were afraid to touch them.

By 1350, the worst of the crisis was over; by then, between 25 and 33 percent of Europe's population had died in the plague. Some cities were especially hard hit. Florence lost about two out of three people.

There were many effects of the plague. Europe's population was greatly reduced. Feudal obligations ended with the death of the noble and his family. After the plague threat had lessened, those tired of the peasant's life used the opportunity to escape to the cities. Workers received higher wages than ever before, but costs went up too. Many monks and priests had died, and their replacements were of poor quality in comparison with them. It would take centuries for Europe to recover from the plague.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. What plague symptoms did John have?

2. Jeanne had another strain of the plague. What were her symptoms?

3. When did the plague arrive in Italy?

4. Why did the plague spread faster in cities than rural areas?

5. Why did a person go through flagellation?

6. What happened to the flagellation movement?

7. What did Jews do differently from others that caused suspicion?

8. Why didn't officers try to stop people infected by the plague from leaving their homes?

9. About what percentage of the people of Europe died from the plague?

10. How did the plague affect feudalism?