

March 29, 2020

# The Bubonic Plague, the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Pandemic that Killed 1/3 of Europe



In the fall of 1347, ships from the east sailed into Mediterranean ports, containing not just goods from the Far East but also plague infested rats. Fleas in the ports bit the rats and carried the disease to humans, who were bitten by the fleas and rarely washed or changed their clothing. The deadly symptoms, which began with swellings in lymph nodes and spots on the skin, killed in three days, virtually without exception. Cities and towns were ill equipped to deal with the dead, whose virulent corpses and clothing stayed in the streets. The plague killed one in three of all Europeans in less than a decade.

Bubonic plague, the medical name for the Black Death, was much more contagious than the Coronavirus, especially because of the unsanitary conditions of 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Primitive attempts to fight the virus were described by Giovanni Boccaccio in his Introduction to a collection of stories called *The Decameron*, about a small group of noblemen who fled Florence and told one another 100 stories for entertainment. This is similar to what we do today when we have to stay in our homes, by watching television and Netflix. Students will read selections from that introduction and compare the Florentine response to what we are doing today about COVID 19.

Another author, chronicler Jean Froissart, described the profound economic changes caused by the plague, including an exceptionally violent uprising of 6,000 peasants in France. Students will research online another uprising, the 1381 Peasant Revolt in England.

Finally, students will read about European Anti-Semitism and the slaughter of Jews, who were blamed for the plague in areas of Europe.

**Subjects:** World History, Language Arts

**Estimated Time:** One hour of home study

**Grade Level:** High School

**Objective:**

Students will compare the current pandemic to an even more devastating one occurring 675 years ago, before the scientific and medical knowledge we have about Coronavirus now.

**Materials:**

- Introduction to The Decameron and Decameron Assignment Recording Sheet
- Jean Froissart: The Jacquerie
- Anti-Semitism and the Black Death

**Procedures:**

- Ask the student: What percentage of Americans who contract the Coronavirus will die from it? (Reveal: 1.8% or less) What percentage of Europeans died of the Bubonic Plague (Reveal: 33%) Review the basic information above about the plague, above.
- The first activity: the student will read selections of the Introduction to The Decameron (Link), recording comparisons/contrasts to the today's pandemic on the Decameron Assignment Recording Sheet (Link).
- The second activity: the student will read Jean Froissart: The Jacquerie (Link) and then try some brief research online about the 1381 Peasant's Revolt in England.
- The third activity: the student will read Anti-Semitism and the Black Death. (Link) If a capstone assignment is desired in an Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate class, students could research Holocaust propaganda and connect it to 14th century anti-Semitism.

**Assessment:**

Teachers may want to receive emailed recording sheets for the first two assignments. Of course, grading at this juncture must be quite lenient.

**About the Author:**

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**Giovanni Boccaccio, description of the Black Death in Florence, 1348**  
**From the introduction to The Decameron**  
**The Signs of Impending Death**

"The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumours. In a short space of time these tumours spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumour had been and still remained.

No doctor's advice, no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease... Either the disease was such that no treatment was possible or the doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it, and consequently could not administer the proper remedy. In any case very few recovered; most people died within about three days of the appearance of the tumours described above, most of them without any fever or other symptoms.

The violence of this disease was such that the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them, just as a fire catches anything dry or oily near it. And it even went further. To speak to or go near the sick brought infection and a common death to the living; and moreover, to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching."

### **Varying Reactions to Disaster**

"Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety.

... They formed small communities, living entirely separate from everybody else. They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick... allowing no news or discussion of death and sickness, and passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures. 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 at what happened. They put their words into practice, spent day and night going from tavern to tavern, drinking immoderately, or went into other people's houses, doing only those things which pleased them.

Many others adopted a course of life midway between the two just described... They did not shut themselves up, but went about, carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands<sup>1</sup>, 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.

Others again held a still more cruel opinion, which they thought would keep them safe. They said that the only medicine against the plague-stricken was to go right away from them. Men and women, convinced of this and caring about nothing but themselves, abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad or at least to the country round Florence, as if God's wrath in punishing men's wickedness with this plague would not follow them but strike only those who remained within the walls of the city, or as if they thought nobody in the city would remain alive and that its last hour had come."

"The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was even more pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets both at night and during the day; and many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbours smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner...With the aid of porters, if they could get them, they carried the bodies out of the houses and laid them at the door; where every morning quantities of the dead might be seen. They then were laid on biers or, as these were often lacking, on tables.

Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full."

*Boccaccio, Giovanni, The Decameron vol. I (translated by Richard Aldington illustrated by Jean de Bosschere) (1930); Gottfried, Robert, The Black Death (1983).*

1 The childhood rhyme "Ring Around the Rosy" is attributed to the Bubonic Plague:  
*Ring around the rosy (cordon off the people with spots on them)*  
*A pocket full of posies (carry flowers when out and about, as above)*  
*Ashes, ashes (burn down the houses of the afflicted)*  
*All fall down (everyone dies)*

## Recording Sheet: Introduction to The Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio

Check the two examples done for you on the handout. Record how the underlined examples compare to Coronavirus responses today.

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <u>the East</u>  | both pandemics were attributed to beginnings in Asia                            |
| <u>swellings in the groin or under the armpit</u>  | initial Coronavirus symptoms are fever, coughing, weakness, shortness of breath |
| <u>no medicine could overcome or alleviate this disease</u>  |   |
| <u>doctors were so ignorant that they did not know what caused it,</u>   |   |
| <u>very few recovered</u>  |   |
| <u>the sick communicated it to the healthy who came near them</u>  |   |
| <u>to touch the clothes or anything else the sick had touched or worn gave the disease to the person touching</u>  |   |
| <u>entirely to avoid the sick</u>  |   |
| <u>They shut themselves up in houses where there were no sick</u>  |   |
| <u>no news or discussion of death and sickness</u>   |   |
| <u>passing the time in music and suchlike pleasures</u>  |   |
| <u>They thought the sure cure for the plague was to drink and be merry</u>   |   |
| <u>carrying flowers or scented herbs or perfumes in their hands,</u>   |   |
| <u>abandoned their own city, their own houses, their dwellings, their relatives, their property, and went abroad or at least to the country round Florence</u> |   |

## Jean Froissart (1337-1405), The Jacquerie

### Social Upheaval Following the Black Death

The economic effects of the Black Death were profound. The medieval manorial system crumbled as the serf population was decimated. Peasants rose in rebellion in parts of Europe, including France in 1358, in an uprising known as the *Jacquerie* (after “Jacques,” the common French epithet for a peasant.)

From the chronicles of Jean Froissart (1337-1405).

For certain people of the common villages, without any head or ruler, assembled together in Beauvoisin. In the beginning they passed not a hundred in number. They said how the noblemen of the realm of France, knights and squires, shamed the realm, and that it should be a great wealth to destroy them all: and each of them said it was true, and said all with one voice: "Shame have he that cloth not his power to destroy all the gentlemen of the realm!"

Thus they gathered together without any other counsel, and without any armour saving with staves and knives, and so went to the house of a knight dwelling thereby, and brake up his house and slew the knight and the lady and all his children great and small and burnt his house.

And they then went to another castle, and took the knight thereof and bound him fast to a stake, and then violated his wife and his daughter before his face and then slew the lady and his daughter and all his other children, and then slew the knight by great torment and burnt and beat down the castle.

And so they did to divers other castles and good houses; and they multiplied so that they were a six thousand, and ever as they went forward they increased... so that every gentleman fled from them and took their wives and children with them, and fled ten or twenty leagues off to be in surety, and left their house void and their goods therein.

...I dare not write the horrible deeds that they did to ladies and damoiselles; among other they slew a knight and after did put him on a broach and roasted him at the fire in the sight of the lady his wife and his children; and after the lady had been enforced and ravished with a ten or twelve, they made her perforce to eat of her husband and after made her to die an evil death and all her children.

...There burnt and destroyed more than a hundred castles and good houses of knights and squires in that country.

From G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The Chronicles of Froissart*, Lord Berners, trans. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), pp. 136-137.

[https://www.slideshare.net/mrplough07/black-plague-12195176?next\\_slideshow=1](https://www.slideshare.net/mrplough07/black-plague-12195176?next_slideshow=1)

# **The Black Death and Anti-Semitism**

## **Reasons for God's Wrath**

...By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, it was clear that the Christians had little if no chance of evicting the Muslims from Palestine. In fact, the entire idea of the crusades had waned. There were no more stalwarts for new crusades.

After a short while, there arose a new idea among the European Christian masses why the Black Death was ravaging their land: because they allowed the Jews to live in their midst as Jews. This reason became widely accepted. Therefore, in many communities throughout Christian Europe the formula and prescription of saving the community from the plague lay in either converting, exiling or murdering the Jewish population.

From 1349 until about 1390, the Jewish communities of France, Germany and England almost disappeared completely. In 1350, Frankfurt had over 19,000 Jews. By 1400, not even 10 Jews were left. That typified the situation in many other communities throughout Western Europe.

## **Why Jews were Less Affected**

...if Jews died at a lesser rate, it can be attributed to the sanitary practices of Jewish law.

For instance, Jewish law compels one to wash his or her hands many times throughout the day. In the general medieval world a person could go half his or her life without ever washing his hands. According to Jewish law, one could not eat food without washing one's hands, leaving the bathroom and after any sort of intimate human contact. At least once a week, a Jew bathed for the Sabbath. The sanitary conditions in the Jewish neighborhood, primitive as it may be by today's standards, was always far superior to the general sanitary conditions.

Jewish law also prescribes certain sanitary conditions related to burial of the dead. Leaving corpses unburied not only abetted the conditions that spread the bubonic plague but typhus and other diseases as well.

## **Well Poisoning and other Canards**

The official Church position during the Black Death was on the whole pro-Jewish. More than one pope – Boniface, Innocent and other popes (about four had to really contend with the problem) — issued proclamations that the Jews were not at fault and should be protected. The way to salvation did not lie in the destruction of the Jews.

But the situation was so out of hand that the official word of the pope did not carry much weight — especially considering that due to the great schism raging within the church at the time there were two popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome. The power of the pope was diminished.

There then arose a second theory regarding the Black Death: The origin of the plague was that the drinking water wells were poisoned. Who were the poisoners? Naturally, the Jews. Why would they do that? Because they took delight in destroying the Christian world. They were the agents of Satan, the anti-Christ. Therefore, it was nothing for the Jews to poison the well.

## **Massacres**

Once the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells, a wave of pogroms ensued. In January 1349, the entire Jewish community in the city of Basel was burned at the stake. The Jewish communities of Freiburg, Augsburg, Nurnberg, Munich, Konigsberg, Regensburg, and other centers, all were either exiled or burned. In Worms, in March 1349, the entire Jewish community committed suicide. In Cologne, the Jews were forced to flee.

In Mainz, which had the largest Jewish community in Europe, the Jews defended themselves against the mob and killed over 200 Christians. Then the Christians came to take revenge. On one day alone, on August 24, 1349, they killed 6,000 Jews in Mainz.

Of the 3,000 Jews in Erfurt, none survived the attack of the Christian mobs. By 1350, those Jews that survived the Black Death itself were destroyed by the ravages of the mobs. The Jewish communities in Antwerp and Brussels were entirely exterminated in 1350. There were almost no Jews left in Germany or the Low Countries by 1351.

The impact of the Black Death on Jewish history cannot be underestimated.

<https://www.jewishhistory.org/the-black-death/>