

What

The Black Death spread across Europe in the 1340s, having been introduced by Italian traders early in the decade. It finally hit Britain in 1348 and spread quickly throughout the country. It was carried in the fleas of Black Rats who lived on ships. Once the rat died of the Plague the flea would jump onto the nearest living thing, which given the poor state of Public Health was generally a human.

The disease seems to have had two ways of attacking the body. One became known as the Bubonic Plague which left the victim with a high fever and black swellings in the armpits, neck and groin. The second form of attack hit the lungs and left the victim coughing blood and eventually drowning in their own fluids as their lungs filled with phlegm. This became known as the Pneumonic Plague (Despite being from the same disease).

The Black Death killed between 1/3 and 1/2 of the population of Europe.

It slowly died away as people became more immune to it but it came back each summer and tended to kill the old and the young.

Short-term impact

- Killed many (up to half the population)
- Led to a shortage of workers and an increase in wages
- Some peasants became richer as they bought land that had been left empty

Medieval Black Death: 1348

Beliefs About Causes

Due to the strong Christian influence there were two main ideas about how the Black Death was being spread.

The first was SUPERNATURAL and the second was NATURAL.

Ultimately because no-one knew about germs or vectors (the rats) this led to much speculation.

Supernatural Causes

- God was sending the plague as a punishment for the sins of the people (such as children disobeying their parents and women wearing high heels).
- The Devil had sent it as a way to turn souls to his evil ways.
- This was the beginning of the end of days and God was coming to deliver his final judgement on mankind.

Natural Causes

- It was caused by bad smells (miasma).
- It was caused by foul air thrown up by Volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.
- The planets were causing the Plague
- It spread through touch (close!)
- The humours were out of balance.



Cures

Again, due to the lack of knowledge people came up with both NATURAL and SUPERNATURAL cures for the disease. Most would have been fairly ineffective.

Supernatural Cures

- Build a candle the height of yourself to burn as an offering in your local church to show how holy you were.
- Flagellants walked from town to town whipping themselves to show how sorry they were for their sins, hoping to prevent the plague by appeasing God (this may have actually helped spread the plague!).
- Paying for prayers to be said on your behalf in Church.

Natural Cures

- Eat crushed emeralds (ineffective and only for the rich!)
- Clean up the streets to avoid the bad smells (this worked!)
- Runaway or quarantine your town to stop plague carriers from coming in!
- Burst the Buboes (this may have worked)
- Bleed the patient to balance the humours.

Long-term impact

- Led to the peasants winning their freedom from the Feudal System as their work was more important than keeping them on the land.
- Led to the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 as the government tried to stop wage rises.
- Led to new ideas about medicine, such as quarantining people who were ill.
- Towns got bigger as more peasants bought their freedom