

10.20 The end of the world...

This labelled illustration presents some of the short-term impacts of the Black Death on medieval society.

The Black Death caused a huge labour shortage in towns and on the farms. Many feudal manors were largely deserted, either because workers had died or run away. At the time many people believed it was the end of the world.

Source 1 A modern artist's impression of the impact of the plague on a medieval town

The plague caused some people to question their beliefs. Many priests died too, causing some to think that the Church was powerless to stop this terrible epidemic.

There were so many dead bodies (in the streets and houses), they had to be buried in mass pits. Bodies were collected and put on carts that travelled the streets.



Plague doctors wore full-body cloaks, and masks with long beaks filled with sweet-smelling substances. Sick female patients began to allow male doctors to examine all parts of their bodies, which was not common before.

Believing the plague was God's punishment for wrongdoing, people known as flagellants began walking the streets whipping themselves in a bid to repent for their sins and ask forgiveness from God.

Some people adopted an 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die' attitude, celebrating in drinking houses as they waited to die.

Doctors suggested unusual cures, such as telling people to sniff herbs or lemon leaves, or even their own faeces. Sometimes leeches were attached to the skin to remove blood believed to be causing an imbalance in the body.

People began to avoid others for fear of catching the disease; some ran away. Many victims were abandoned even by their own family and were left to suffer and die alone.

People did not know then about the health dangers associated with mice and rats, nor did they know that disease could be transferred by coughing and sneezing.

Check your learning 10.20

Remember and understand

- 1 Using Source 1, identify five short-term impacts of the Black Death that have hit this medieval town.

10.21 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

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 or freedom to travel). 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 began to realise 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, and that changes had to be made.

For more information on the key concept of cause and effect, refer to page 194 of 'The history toolkit'.



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

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 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 fact that religious leaders were not able 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** to young artists and students. 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

Another long-term effect of the Black Death 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. Africans from the Sahara region began to be taken as slaves to boost Europe's greatly reduced labour force. 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.

Check your learning 10.21

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.

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