

Children abandoned; bodies in the street; three fourths of the population wiped out; this is what a town struck by bubonic plague in the Middle Ages was like. Many things contributed to the spreading of the plague. The everyday life and technology of people in the Middle Ages was not helpful in keeping the plague from spreading or in keeping peace and order. The trade routes only quickened the spreading by carrying the cause of bubonic plague to other regions. Medical knowledge and health standards were all but non-existent, causing the deadly plague to devastate Europe. The Middle Ages were a low point of Europe's history in which fear and terror ran rampant, only enhanced by the spreading of a deadly plague.

Bubonic plague arrived in Europe on Italian trading ships in 1347, and ravaged the continent for five straight years. It took the lives of over twenty million people; over half of Europe's population. The cause of the illness was unknown, and the most common theory was that the plague was a punishment for sinners sent by God. The true cause was a bacteria called *Yersina pestis* which was transmitted to humans through the bite of an infected flea. Black rats, which thrived at the time, served as a host to the fleas.

Everyday life contributed greatly to the middle ages being a low point. Laws were not enforced often causing a dangerous environment where people had to look out for themselves; violence was common. Of course, education also played a primary role in this as most burglars had no education at all and thus; instead of working they would simply resort to steal (Far). Only needed skills were taught to children, such as animal keeping, crop growing, and house building for boys, and spinning, weaving, and cooking for girls. Very few people were literate before the thirteenth century.

Everyday technology consisted of mills used to grind grain and plows for farming. One of the biggest inventions of the time was the mold-board, a plow that turned up soil better. Food

and everyday meals usually featured wheat and rye, which were the main crops grown. Bread made from these grains was featured at most meals and white bread was rare. If a person had white bread to eat, they were considered to be of high social status. Vegetables and greens were thought dangerous, and were not eaten.

Bartering systems were mainly used due to the money disappearing early in the Middle Ages. Things that people could not make themselves had to be bought at markets. Food, clothes, tools and other more unattainable items were usually traded.. There were few proper roads, which made traveling long distances next to impossible. Pack horses didn't need roads, but were slow, so water transportation was the preferred method of transportation. Markets were usually located around rivers or crossroads for this reason, and their goods were usually bartered, but coins reappeared in 800 A.D. Moneylenders and banks seized this opportunity. Exchange was difficult however, because all governments issued their own coins. Trade remained the primary system of exchange, helping disease travel.

There was little knowledge of health and medicine in the Middle Ages. The average lifespan was about forty years, and people died of easily cured illnesses. Medicine was different- it had nothing to do with chemistry or biology, and a little of the medical knowledge of the ancient Greeks, which reached Europe through the work of Islamic scholars (Grant 34). Most so-called cures, such as blood-letting, did more harm than good. Some medicines made in apothecaries with herbs actually worked though. An herb called mandrake was used in many cures, and it contains a chemical that affects the nerves. Monasteries had large herb gardens, and often served as hospitals to the poor. Patients were cared for by monks or nuns, and were not visited by ordinary doctors or surgeons. Ordinary doctors had a high status in society, but were known to be more concerned in their fee than patients. Surgeons would double as barbers!

Ordinary people had little knowledge of health or hygiene and knew nothing of the dangers of infection. Waste was thrown in the streets and toilets were emptied into open drains. Wells were polluted. Homes had dirt floors and were often shared with animals (Deeringer).

The plague appeared in three main forms, bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plague, each deadly. Septicemic plague was the rarest form and attacked the bloodstream. It killed everyone infected by it. Pneumonic plague was the second rarest and spread quicker than the rest due to its ability to spread through the air (sneezing, coughing, etc.). It caused coughing, sneezing, and the vomiting of blood. It killed the fastest as well. The Italian writer Boccaccio wrote that this form of the disease killed people so fast that they often “ate lunch with their friends and dinner with their ancestors in paradise” (Deeringer). Bubonic plague was the most common and it killed sixty percent of its victims. It normally took about five days for the bacteria to strike its victim down, and caused many symptoms. The infection made itself present first with weakness, headaches, chills, and a fever of around 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Next came vomiting, rapid heartbeat, delirium, staggered walking, and strange behavior. Soon after came swollen lymph nodes ringed with black skin and black boils, which earned bubonic plague the nickname “Black Death.” The infection ended its victim through collapsing their nervous system or sending them into a coma they would never awaken from.

The spreading of a deadly plague created a low point in Europe’s history that was full of fear and terror. Life in the Middle Ages, knowledge and medical standards all cast a dark shadow over the time period. There was torture, war, plague and other bad situations which made the Middle Ages seem dark (Far). I wrote about this topic because I find it to be an interesting time period and I enjoy learning about medical information such as plagues and diseases.

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