
The Black Plague in Medieval Europe

The Black Plague greatly improved the economic state of medieval Europe, giving rise to new opportunities which brought profound changes to its structure and society. The large number of deaths severely reduced the number of labour services that were available. As a result, labourers were more readily able to feed both themselves and their families, had more freedom, and an overall higher standard of living as they began to demand higher wages, better working conditions, and fewer responsibilities from their lords. Ultimately, this ended the feudal system and contributed to the rise of capitalism in Europe.

In his book, *Encyclopedia of the Black Death*, Joseph Byrne emphasizes the redistribution of concentrated wealth through inheritance among the survivors. Accompanied with higher wages, the people of Europe bought better food, more fashionable clothing, jewellery, and other luxurious items. This brought a diminution of the upper class, and sparked a strong relative growth in the middling peasantry classes, creating what is known today as the middle class. As the cities of Europe grew, there was a greater demand for professionals and skilled trade workers. This delivered the incentive for cities to make special offers including immediate citizenship, and tax exemptions for the rural folk to make it easier for them to relocate. This created many job opportunities for the people of Europe, especially to those who were pursuing those careers that were in high demand.

The contribution of the many peasants who moved to the cities in the years following the Black Death may have contributed to the rise of capitalism. The technological development initiated by the disease benefited the society and economy of Europe as it was able to provide practical applications to fulfil the demands and needs of the people. As the demand for books was growing, the invention of the Johann Gutenberg printing press allowed for books to be more accessible to the general public, enabling the common person to receive information and news of the world around them. There were also improvements in military technology as the wages and need for soldiers rose. The newly introduced weapons made Europe stronger, providing security and benefiting its people militarily and financially. In his book, *The Black Death*, Robert Gottfried explains that it was the increased demand for metal for guns and bullion that caused a general expansion in the mining industry. This facilitated the growth of the industrial age by providing the resources necessary for technological innovations that benefitted the people of medieval Europe economically, financially, and medically.

The disease of the plague led to revolutionizing medical advances, ideas, and practices that allowed for the people of Europe to control and prevent subsequent diseases with a more scientific approach. There was a greater emphasis on practical physical sciences and clinically orientated medicine, reflected by the growing influence of surgeons, as prayer and traditional medicine failed to provide a cure to the disease. The people were thus provided a good starting point to begin curing various diseases. In the book, *Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times*, Samuel K. Cohn Jr. explains that the Black Plague gave doctors a whole new range of practical experience. Before the plague, human anatomy remained a mystery as the dissection of human cadavers was forbidden.

However in 1348, the ban was lifted, thus enabling doctors to better understand the cause of

the Black Death. The discoveries made during this time period were the basis of all medical developments in Europe, enabling the people to secure themselves against future outbreaks. In his book, *The Black Death*, Robert Gottfried also describes the revolutionized role of hospitals following the Black Plague. This provided the people of Europe with a place where they could be treated of their illness instead of being left to die. The search for the cure opened up the doors to human curiosity, which enviably led to the development of modern medicine.

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