

The Black Death Source Pack

Welcome to this source pack on the Black Death, a pandemic described by Professor Mark Bailey as standing 'unchallenged as the greatest disaster in documented human history, claiming the lives of up to half the population of Europe in just a handful of years'. These sources and questions are intended to be read alongside the brief sample lecture by Dr Alex Brown introducing students to the topic on Durham University's history department website. The sources themselves come from Professor Rosemary Horrox's excellent sourcebook on the Black Death (where you'll find many more contemporary examples if you wish to know more) - Rosemary Horrox (ed.), *The Black Death* (Manchester, 1994) available to purchase here: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Death-Manchester-Medieval-Sources/dp/0719034981>.

Controversial debates abound surrounding the Black Death, ranging from the nature of the disease itself to its long-term societal impact. Was the disease actually *Yersinia Pestis* (taking the form of bubonic, pneumonic and septicaemic plague)? How did contemporaries seek to explain the disease and treat it? How did they respond in the face of unprecedented mortality and how did scapegoating lead to one of the worst examples of anti-Semitic persecution in European history? And, above all, how did the Black Death change society? Did it lead to the decline of serfdom and the first stirrings of the Reformation and Renaissance? From the below sources, you can begin to interpret some of these questions surrounding the Black Death yourselves.

Causes and Impact of the Disease

Debate has long raged over the nature of the disease itself, with many historians over the twentieth century pointing out that the Black Death spread far too quickly, was too contagious and killed too many people to be plague (which still exists in parts of the world today). However, teams of scientists and archaeologists have found *Yersinia Pestis* (responsible for bubonic plague) in the teeth of medieval skeletons, seemingly putting the argument to bed that it was indeed plague. Yet many questions abound. Read the following extract of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* – who witnessed many of the horrors of the disease first hand – and think about some of these questions:

- What are the difficulties of using such a literary source to diagnose the disease?
- How did the Black Death spread throughout medieval society?
- How did contemporaries seek to explain and understand such unprecedented mortality?
- How might the Black Death have affected social relations in medieval society?

A literary description of the plague's arrival and impact (pages 26-34 in Horrox, *Black Death*)

The introduction to the Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) is the most famous literary treatment of the Black Death. As Boccaccio himself emphasises, however, the description is based on his own experiences in Florence and the picture he gives can be paralleled in chronicle accounts of the period. This translation by G. H. McWilliam is taken from the Penguin Classics edition of the Decameron, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 50-58.

I say, then, that the sum of thirteen hundred and forty-eight years had elapsed since the fruitful Incarnation of the Son of God, when the noble city of Florence, which for its great beauty excels all others in Italy, was visited by the deadly pestilence. Some say that it descended upon the human race through the influence of the heavenly bodies, others that it was a punishment signifying God's righteous anger at our iniquitous way of life. But whatever its cause, it had originated some years earlier in the East, where it had claimed countless lives before it unhappily spread westward, growing in strength as it swept relentlessly on from one place to the next.

In the face of its onrush, all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing. Large quantities of refuse were cleared out of the city by officials specially appointed for the purpose, all sick persons were forbidden entry, and numerous instructions were issued for safeguarding the people's health, but all to no avail. Nor were the countless petitions humbly directed to God by the pious, whether by means of formal processions or in any other guise, any less ineffectual. For in the early spring of the year we have mentioned, the plague began, in a terrifying and extraordinary manner, to make its disastrous effects apparent. It did not take the form it had assumed in the East, where if anyone bled from the nose it was an obvious portent of certain death. On the contrary, its earliest symptom, in men and women alike, was the appearance of certain swellings in the groin or the armpit, some of which were egg-shaped whilst others were roughly the size of the common apple. Sometimes the swellings were large, sometimes not so large, and they were referred to by the populace as *gavòccioli*. From the two areas already mentioned, this deadly *gavòcciolo* would begin to spread, and within a short time it would appear at random all over the body. Later on, the symptoms of the disease changed, and many people began to find dark blotches and bruises on their arms, thighs, and other parts of the body, sometimes large and few in number, at other times tiny and closely spaced. These, to anyone unfortunate enough to contract them, were just as infallible a sign that he would die as the *gavòcciolo* had been earlier, and as indeed it still was.

Against these maladies, it seemed that all the advice of physicians and all the power of medicine were profitless and unavailing. Perhaps the nature of the illness was such that it allowed no remedy; or perhaps those people who were treating the illness (whose numbers had increased enormously because the ranks of the qualified were invaded by people, both men and women, who had never received any training in medicine), being ignorant of its causes, were not prescribing the appropriate cure. At all events, few of those who caught it ever recovered, and in most cases death occurred within three days from the appearance of the symptoms we have described, some people dying more rapidly than others, the majority without any fever or other complications.

But what made this pestilence even more severe was that whenever those suffering from it mixed with people who were still unaffected, it would rush upon these with the speed of a fire racing through dry or oily substances that happened to be placed within its reach. Nor was this the full extent of its evil, for not only did it infect healthy persons who conversed or had any dealings with the sick, making them ill or visiting an equally horrible death upon them, but it also seemed to transfer the sickness to anyone touching the clothes or other objects which had been handled or used by its victims.

It is a remarkable story that I have to relate. And were it not for the fact that I am one of many people who saw it with their own eyes, I would scarcely dare to believe it, let alone commit it to paper, even though I had heard it from a person whose word I could trust. The plague I have been describing was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass from one person to another. In other words, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had been stricken or exterminated by the disease, it not only

caught the sickness, but died from it almost at once. To all of this, as I have just said, my own eyes bore witness on more than one occasion. One day, for instance, the rags of a pauper who had died from the disease were thrown into the street, where they attracted the attention of two pigs. In their wonted fashion, the pigs first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts after which they took them between their teeth and shook them against their cheeks. And within a short time they began to writhe as though they had been poisoned, then they both dropped dead to the ground, spreadeagled upon the rags that had brought about their undoing.

These things, and many others of a similar or even worse nature, caused various fears and fantasies to take root in the minds of those who were still alive and well. And almost without exception, they took a single and very inhuman precaution, namely to avoid or run away from the sick and their belongings, by which means they all thought that their own health would be preserved.

Some people were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection. They therefore formed themselves into groups and lived in isolation from everyone else. Having withdrawn to a comfortable abode where there were no sick persons, they locked themselves in and settled down to a peaceable existence, consuming modest quantities of delicate foods and precious wines and avoiding all excesses. They refrained from speaking to outsiders, refused to receive news of the dead or sick, and entertained themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise.

Others took the opposite view, and maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking, gratify all of one's cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke. Moreover, they practised what they preached to the best of their ability, for they would visit one tavern after another, drinking all day and night to immoderate excess; or alternatively (and this was their more frequent custom), they would do their drinking in various private houses, but only in the ones where the conversation was restricted to subjects that were pleasant or entertaining. Such places were easy to find, for people behaved as though their days were numbered, and treated their belongings and their own persons with equal abandon. Hence most houses had become common property, and any passing stranger could make himself at home as naturally as though he were the rightful owner. But for all their riotous manner of living, these people always took good care to avoid any contact with the sick.

In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city. For like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties. Hence everyone was free to behave as he pleased.

There were many other people who steered a middle course between the two already mentioned, neither restricting their diet to the same degree as the first group, nor indulging so freely as the second in drinking and other forms of wantonness, but simply doing no more than satisfy their appetite. Instead of incarcerating themselves, these people moved about freely, holding in their hands a posy of flowers, or fragrant herbs, or one of a wide range of spices, which they applied at frequent intervals to their nostrils, thinking it an excellent idea to fortify the brain with smells of that particular sort; for the stench of dead bodies, sickness, and medicines seemed to fill and pollute the whole of the atmosphere.

Some people, pursuing what was possibly the safer alternative, callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it. Swayed by this argument, and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large numbers of men and

women abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates and their belongings, and headed for the countryside, either in Florentine territory or, better still, abroad. It was as though they imagined that the wrath of God would not unleash this plague against men for their iniquities irrespective of where they happened to be, but would only be aroused against those who found themselves within the city walls; or possibly they assumed that the whole of the population would be exterminated and that the city's last hour had come.

Of the people who held these various opinions, not all of them died. Nor, however, did they all survive. On the contrary, many of each different persuasion fell ill here, there, and everywhere, and having themselves, when they were fit and well, set an example to those who were as yet unaffected, they languished away with virtually no one to nurse them. It was not merely a question of one citizen avoiding another, and of people almost invariably neglecting their neighbours and rarely or never visiting their relatives, addressing them only from a distance; this scourge had implanted so great a terror in the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and in many cases wives deserted their husbands. But even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them.

Hence the countless numbers of people who fell ill, both male and female, were entirely dependent upon either the charity of friends (who were few and far between) or the greed of servants, who remained in short supply despite the attraction of high wages out of all proportion to the services they performed. Furthermore, these latter were men and women of coarse intellect and the majority were unused to such duties, and they did little more than hand things to the invalid when asked to do so and watch over him when he was dying. And in performing this kind of service, they frequently lost their lives as well as their earnings.

As a result of this wholesale desertion of the sick by neighbours, relatives and friends, and in view of the scarcity of servants, there grew up a practice almost never previously heard of, whereby when a woman fell ill, no matter how gracious or beautiful or gently bred she might be, she raised no objection to being attended by a male servant, whether he was young or not. Nor did she have any scruples about showing him every part of her body as freely as she would have displayed it to a woman, provided that the nature of her infirmity required her to do so; and this explains why those women who recovered were possibly less chaste in the period that followed.

Moreover a great many people died who would perhaps have survived had they received some assistance. And hence, what with the lack of appropriate means for tending the sick, and the virulence of the plague, the number of deaths reported in the city whether by day or night was so enormous that it astonished all who heard tell of it, to say nothing of the people who actually witnessed the carnage. And it was perhaps inevitable that among the citizens who survived there arose certain customs that were quite contrary to established tradition.

It had once been customary, as it is again nowadays, for the women relatives and neighbours of a dead man to assemble in his house in order to mourn in the company of the women who had been closest to him; moreover his kinsfolk would gather in front of his house along with his neighbours and various other citizens, and there would be a contingent of priests, whose numbers varied according to the quality of the deceased; his body would be taken thence to the church in which he had wanted to be buried, being borne on the shoulders of his peers amidst the funeral pomp of candles and dirges. But as the ferocity of the plague began to mount, this practice all but disappeared entirely and was replaced by different customs. For not only did people die without having many women about them, but a great number departed this life without anyone at all to witness their going. Few indeed were those to whom the lamentations and bitter tears of their relatives were accorded; on the contrary, more often than not bereavement was the signal for

laughter and witticisms and general jollification – the art of which the women, having for the most part suppressed their feminine concern for the salvation of the souls of the dead, had learned to perfection. Moreover it was rare for the bodies of the dead to be accompanied by more than ten or twelve neighbours to church, nor were they borne on the shoulders of worthy and honest citizens, but by a kind of gravedigging fraternity, newly come into being and drawn from the lower orders of society. These people assumed the title of sexton, and demanded a fat fee for their services, which consisted in taking up the coffin and hauling it swiftly away, not to the church specified by the dead man in his will, but usually to the nearest at hand. They would be preceded by a group of four or six clerics, who between them carried one or two candles at most, and sometimes none at all. Nor did the priests go to the trouble of pronouncing solemn and lengthy funeral rites, but, with the aid of these so-called sextons, they hastily lowered the body into the nearest empty grave they could find.

As for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie, they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained, either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in their thousands, and since they had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses than by any other means. And what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there and everywhere.

Whenever people died, their neighbours nearly always followed a single, set routine, prompted as much by their fear of being contaminated by the decaying corpse as by any charitable feelings they may have entertained towards the deceased. Either on their own, or with the assistance of bearers whenever these were to be had, they extracted the bodies of the dead from their houses and left them lying outside their front doors, where anybody going about the streets, especially in the early morning, could have observed countless numbers of them. Funeral biers would then be sent for, upon which the dead were taken away, though there were some who, for lack of biers, were carried off on plain boards. It was by no means rare for more than one of these biers to be seen with two or three bodies upon it at a time; on the contrary, many were seen to contain a husband and wife, two or three brothers and sisters, a father and son, or some other pair of close relatives. And times without number it happened that two priests would be on their way to bury someone, holding a cross before them, only to find that bearers carrying three or four additional biers would fall in behind them; so that whereas the priests had thought that they had only one burial to attend to, they in fact had six or seven, and sometimes more. Even in these circumstances, however, there were no tears or candles or mourners to honour the dead; in fact, no more respect was accorded to dead people than would nowadays be shown towards dead goats. For it was quite apparent that the one thing which, in normal times, no wise man had ever learned to accept with patient resignation (even though it struck so seldom and unobtrusively), had now been brought home to the feeble-minded as well, but the scale of the calamity caused them to regard it with indifference.

Such was the multitude of corpses (of which further consignments were arriving every day and almost by the hour at each of the churches), that there was not sufficient consecrated ground for them to be buried in, especially if each was to have its own plot in accordance with long-established custom. So when all the graves were full, huge trenches were excavated in the churchyards, into which new arrivals were placed in their hundreds, stowed tier upon tier like ships' cargo, each layer of corpses being covered over with a thin layer of soil till the trench was filled to the top.

But rather than describe in elaborate detail the calamities we experienced in the city at that time, I must mention that, whilst an ill wind was blowing through Florence itself, the surrounding region was no less badly affected. In the fortified towns, conditions were similar to those in the city itself on a minor scale; but in the scattered hamlets and the countryside proper, the poor unfortunate peasants and their families had no physicians or servants whatever to assist them, and collapsed by the wayside, in their fields, and in their cottages at all hours of the day and night, dying more like animals than human beings. Like the townspeople, they too grew apathetic in their ways, disregarded their affairs, and neglected their possessions. Moreover, they all behaved as though each day was to be their last, and far from making provision for the future by tilling their lands, tending their flocks, and adding to their previous labours, they tried in every way they could think of to squander the assets already in their possession. Thus it came about that oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and even dogs (for all their deep fidelity to man) were driven away and allowed to roam freely through the fields, where the crops lay abandoned and had not even been reaped, let alone gathered in. And after a whole day's feasting, many of these animals, as though possessing the power of reason, would return gluttoned in the evening to their own quarters, without any shepherd to guide them.

But let us leave the countryside and return to the city. What more remains to be said, except that the cruelty of heaven (and possibly, in some measure, also that of man) was so immense and so devastating that between March and July of the year in question, what with the fury of the pestilence and the fact that so many of the sick were inadequately cared for or abandoned in their hour of need because the healthy were too terrified to approach them, it is reliably thought that over a hundred thousand human lives were extinguished within the walls of the city of Florence? Yet before this lethal catastrophe fell upon the city, it is doubtful whether anyone would have guessed it contained so many inhabitants.

Medical Explanations of the Disease

For much of the twentieth century, historians were often critical – even dismissive at times – of contemporary attempts to explain and treat the disease. After all, medieval medicine was based upon the concept of humours and the disease was often explained in terms of corrupt air. Yet, in recent decades there has been an increasing attempt to understand medieval medicine in its own rights, and how contemporaries came to their conclusions. Indeed, given our own experience of covid-19 and the considerable delay between an initial outbreak of a novel disease and the production of a vaccine, we are as vulnerable to some of the caprices of nature as medieval society. When reading through this medical tract about the disease, think about the following:

- How did medieval people believe the plague was spread?
- What principles were such theories based upon?
- How confident were contemporaries about preventing or curing the disease?
- How effective do you think such precautions were?

The transmission of plague (pages 182-184 in Horrox, *Black Death*)

These extracts are from a treatise on the epidemic written in 1349 by a doctor of Montpellier. The work is loosely based on the report of the Paris medical faculty [56], but the attempt to explain how the plague was transmitted is the author's own.

This epidemic, according to some people, has the power to kill large numbers by air alone, simply by the breath or the conversation of the sick. They say that the air breathed out by the sick and inhaled by the healthy people round about wounds and kills them, and that this occurs particularly when the sick are on the point of death. But that would kill gradually, after an interval rather than straight away; and the greater strength of this epidemic is such that it kills almost instantly, as soon as the airy spirit leaving the eyes of the sick man has struck the eye of a healthy bystander looking at him, for then the poisonous nature passes from one eye to the other. And this occurs particularly when the sick are at the point of death.

No one who has seen the theories of Euclid concerning burning glasses, and concave and reflecting glasses, will be surprised by this, but will appreciate that the origins of this epidemic and its ability to pass from the sick to the healthy and to kill them, are natural and not miraculous; for something is only 'miraculous' when it does not have a natural reason or cause. The airy and subtle nature which issues from the heat and brightness of the sun is immediately kindled and flares up when reflected by two mirrors. This is achieved by condensing thin air just using the brightness generated by the sun's rays and the mirrors. That brightness can be used to burn and destroy nearby buildings, houses, castles and trees, and an example of this can be found in Euclid's book. In the same way the corruption of the air has an impact on human bodies, and it has a more immediate impact on them than on other things because of the soft primary matter of which they are compounded.

[The writer then discusses the planetary conjunction in Aquarius, and concludes that one consequence for the northern hemisphere was that the dominance of Saturn, a cold planet, meant that plants did not ripen but had to be eaten when under-ripe.]

And such food inevitably brings sickness, because it ferments in the stomach to create a dangerous viscid and windy moisture, and draws the blood into the liver, which inevitably causes sickness and poisoning. This corrupt matter often forms a windy ulcer, and this is why many such ulcers form on the right side of the body rather than the left. And then man is epidemic [sic].

When the windy moisture has filled one place, it ascends via the jugular vein to the brain, and when it reaches the lungs it fills the pulmonary canals, stopping the movement of the lungs so that they cannot ventilate the heart to cool it. And then the heart grows hot, causing a pestilential fever, and that fever stirs up the humours, which erupt into internal and external ulcers, some of which are caused by the humours and others by wind. Then the brain, in sympathy with the heart because of its motion and sponginess, draws the windy and poisonous moisture from the lungs to itself and then ejects it through the ears. The sufferer experiences a terrific din, like a door being smashed down, which is caused by the primary windiness failing to escape, and then the victims die soon afterwards. But sometimes the brain expels the windy and poisonous matter via the optic nerves at the eyes. This is agony, and the sick man stares fixedly ahead, as if he cannot move his eyes. Amazingly, as it stands in the eyes, the primary windiness assumes the characteristics of a poisonous vapour, and seeks a new home in some other body, which it can enter and be at rest. And if a healthy person sees this visible vapour, he is stamped with the pestilential illness. The man is poisoned faster than air can leave the sick man, for the thin poison moves faster than the heavy air.

Take the example of the basilisk. Whenever one of these creatures chances upon a healthy person who is looking at it, a visible poisonous vapour passes from the eyes of the basilisk into the eye of the observer, and immediately, without warning, poisons him, or works upon him in some other way so that he is sure to die. And it is a characteristic of the basilisk that it always looks upon the brightest member, that is, the eye. Accordingly, someone who wants to capture a basilisk lights a lantern and sets it above his head, and holds something in front of his eyes, and then the basilisk

will choose to look at the light and not at the eyes of his captor, and so can be grabbed and killed. This is also why the weasel, arming itself with rue leaves to protect its eyes, can boldly attack the serpent and kill it. Similarly, the book which Aristotle wrote for Alexander includes the story of a serving girl who was fed on poison by a queen who then sent her to Alexander to kill him by her look and embrace alone. When Aristotle saw the girl he knew by her eyes that she was poisonous and warned Alexander to stay away from her, which he did. They then made a stranger sleep with her, and he died immediately.

From this we may conclude that we should above all take precautions against the gaze and breath of people in the throes of illness. This explains why those in the company of the sick, or employed about them, die so quickly.... Therefore when a doctor, priest or friend wants to visit an invalid he should persuade him to close his eyes and then blindfold him with a linen cloth. When this has been done the visitor can treat him, listen to him and handle him in confidence, if he also holds a sponge soaked in vinegar to his nose in hot weather or, in cold weather, keeps his nose in a handful of rue and cummin. And let him also avoid the breath of the invalid.

Popular Expressions of Devotion

Although contemporaries sought to explain the spread of the disease and its causes scientifically – through the astrological conjunction of planets and the malign impact this had upon people – the ultimate cause of the disease was seen to be God. As a result, many of the attempts to prevent the disease focused upon appeasing His will. One of the more extreme examples of this were the flagellants, a group who spread throughout large parts of medieval Europe and, as the source graphically explains below, whipped themselves in order to atone for their sins. Although initially endorsed by the papacy, their more extreme nature increasingly saw them condemned by church authorities. When reading through the following, think about the following questions:

- Who were the Flagellants and why did people participate in this movement?
- Why was the movement so controversial in this period?
- What is this chronicler's view of the movement?
- What do you think the Flagellants represent about medieval responses to the disease?

The arrival of the flagellants (pages 150-153 in Horrox, *Black Death*)

Almost every European chronicler described the penitential movement, which swept across continental Europe. This account is one of the fullest, and it continues with a detailed analysis (not printed here) of the configuration of the heavens at the beginning of the astrological year (3 a.m. on 12 March 1349, when the sun entered Aries) to demonstrate that the movement and its characteristics were prefigured in the stars. For instance, the conjunction of Mars and Mercury foretold blows and the shedding of blood; while the fact that Scorpio (associated with deceitfulness) occupied the mid heaven forecast the movement's numberless lies.

In 1348 a race without a head aroused universal wonder by their sudden appearance in huge numbers. They suddenly sprang up in all parts of Germany, calling themselves cross bearers or flagellants. They were said, as if in confirmation of the prophecy, to be without a head either because they literally had no head – that is to say no one to organise and lead them – or because they had no head in the sense of having no brain and no judgement; they were fools, laying claim to a form of piety but, as will appear, spoiling everything when their stupidities began to ferment.

They were called cross bearers either because they followed a cross carried before them on their travels, or because they prostrated themselves in the form of a cross during their processions, or because they identified themselves with a cross stitched to their clothes. They were called flagellants because of the whips [flagella] which they used in performing public penance. Each whip consisted of a stick with three knotted thongs hanging from the end. Two pieces of needle-sharp metal were run through the centre of the knots from both sides, forming a cross, the ends of which extended beyond the knots for the length of a grain of wheat or less. Using these whips they beat and whipped their bare skin until their bodies were bruised and swollen and blood rained down, spattering the walls nearby. I have seen, when they whipped themselves, how sometimes those bits of metal penetrated the flesh so deeply that it took more than two attempts to pull them out.

Flocking together from every region, perhaps even from every city, they overran the whole land. In open country they straggled along behind the cross in no particular order, but when they came to cities, towns and villages they formed themselves into a procession, with hoods or hats pulled down over their foreheads, and sad and downcast eyes, they went through the streets singing a sweet hymn. In this fashion they entered the church and shut themselves in while they stripped off their clothes and left them with a guard. They covered themselves from the navel down with a pleated linen cloth like the women's undergarment which we call a kirtle, the upper part of the body remaining bare. Then they took the whips in their hands. When that was done, the north door of the church, if it had one, was opened. The eldest came out of the church first and threw himself to the ground immediately to the east of the door, beside the path. After him, the second lay down on the west side, then the third next to the first, the fourth next to the second and so on. Some lay with right hand raised, as though taking an oath, others lay on their belly or back, or on their right or left side, representing in this way the sins for which they were performing penance.

After this, one of them would strike the first with a whip, saying, 'May God grant you remission of all your sins. Arise'. And he would get up, and do the same to the second, and all the others in turn did the same. When they were all on their feet, and arranged two by two in procession, two of them in the middle of the column would begin singing a hymn in a high voice, with a sweet melody. They sang one verse and then the others took it up and repeated it after them, and then the singers sang the second verse and so on until the end. But whenever they came to the part of the hymn which mentioned the passion of Christ they all suddenly threw themselves down prostrate on the ground, regardless of where they were, and whether the ground was clean or filthy, whether there were thorns or thistles or nettles or stones. And they did not lower themselves gradually to their knees or steadying themselves in some other way, but dropped like logs, flat on their belly and face, with arms outstretched, and, lying there like crosses, would pray. A man would need a heart of stone to watch this without tears. At a sign given by one of them they would rise and resume their procession as before. And usually they sing the hymn three times, and prostrate themselves, as described, three times. And then, when they have returned to the same door by which they left the church, they re-enter and resume their clothes, taking off the linen cloths. As they leave the church they ask for nothing, requesting neither food nor lodging, but accepting with gratitude the many offerings freely made to them.

However, just as annoying tares and persistent burrs often grow among the corn, so the ignorant and stupid, not content with penitential whippings, annoyingly and persistently took upon themselves the job of preaching. They did not think or speak of the clergy and the sacraments of the church with proper reverence, but rather with contempt; spat back rebukes and criticism, and despised persuasion. When they met up with two Dominicans in a field they were so infuriated by their exhortations that they tried to kill them, and although the more nimble managed to make

his escape they stoned the other, and left his body under a pile of stones on the outskirts of Meissen. And they did similar things in many other places.

If somebody said to them, 'Why are you preaching, because you have not been sent, as the apostle says: "How shall they preach, unless they be sent?", and why do you teach what, because you are illiterate, you cannot understand?' they would reply, as if clinching the argument, 'And who sent you, and how do you know that you are consecrating the body of Christ, and that the gospel you are teaching is the truth?' If somebody answers them (as that Dominican answered them) that we have received these things from our Saviour, who consecrated his body and ordered his disciples to do likewise, thereby instituting the form of consecration which has come down to us through them, and that we have been sent by the church and that the gospel that we preach teaches the truth and cannot err, for it is guided by the Holy Spirit; they say that they have been instructed and sent directly by the Lord and by the spirit of God, according to Isaiah 48.16: 'The Lord has sent me and his spirit'.

But Pope Innocent III said this about heretics: 'Since the order of teachers is almost pre-eminent in the church, no one ought to usurp the office of preacher casually. For according to the apostle, how can they preach unless they are sent?' If someone should reply that such things should be sent invisibly by God, rather than visibly by man, for an invisible sending is of higher dignity than a visible, and divine things far better than human; it can reasonably be answered that since an inward sending is invisible, it is not enough for anyone just to say that he has been sent by God, as a heretic would claim, but it is necessary that he should demonstrate his invisible sending by working a miracle or the testimony of scripture. Thus when God chose to send Moses to the children of Israel in Egypt, he gave him a sign so that they would believe that he had been sent by God, and turned his staff into a snake and back again. On the other hand, John the Baptist pointed to scripture as witness of his special sending, saying: 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias' [John 1.23].

However the flagellants ignored and scorned the sentence of excommunication pronounced against them by bishops. They took no notice of the papal order against them – until princes, nobles and the more powerful citizens started to keep them at a distance. The people of Osnabrück never let them in, although their wives and other women clamoured for them. Afterwards they disappeared as suddenly as they had come, as apparitions or ghosts are routed by mockery. Horace puts it well towards the end of his letters: 'Do you laugh at nocturnal ghosts or Thessalian portents?'

Anti-Semitism and Jewish Pogroms

Not all contemporaries explained the outbreak of the disease through scientific or religious means, but instead turned to human agency, blaming Jews and other outsiders for the Black Death. Often involving accusations of well-poisoning, Jewish communities were widely blamed for spreading the disease in parts of Europe, resulting in some of the worst examples of anti-Semitic persecution in European history. The extent to which these attacks were deliberately encouraged and directed by those in authority has been debated, but in many ways this was an outpouring of violence based upon centuries of religious persecution with devastating consequences. When reading the source, think about these questions:

- Who is behind these attacks on Jewish communities?
- What evidence is being brought forward for their involvement?

- How far were Jews and other outsiders scapegoats for the disease?
- To what extent is blame the calling card of pandemics throughout history?

An account of outbreaks of anti-Semitic persecution (pages 208-210 in Horrox, *Black Death*)

The author of this account, Heinrich Truchess (or dapifer) von Diessenhoven, was a canon of Constance who had been a chaplain of Pope John XXII (d.1334).

The persecution of the Jews began in November 1348, and the first outbreak in Germany was at Sölden, where all the Jews were burnt on the strength of a rumour that they had poisoned wells and rivers, as was afterwards confirmed by their own confessions and also by the confessions of Christians whom they had corrupted and who had been induced by the Jews to carry out the deed. And some of the Jews who were newly baptised said the same. Some of these remained in the faith but some others relapsed, and when these were placed upon the wheel they confessed that they had themselves sprinkled poison or poisoned rivers. And thus no doubt remained of their deceitfulness which had now been revealed.

Within the revolution of one year, that is from All Saints [1 November] 1348 until Michaelmas [29 September] 1349 all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt and killed for this crime, young men and maidens and the old along with the rest. And blessed be God who confounded the ungodly who were plotting the extinction of his church, not realising that it is founded on a sure rock and who, in trying to overturn it, crushed themselves to death and were damned for ever.

But now let us follow the killings individually. First Jews were killed or burnt in Sölden in November, then in Zofingen they were seized and some put on the wheel, then in Stuttgart they were all burnt. The same thing happened during November in Landsberg, a town in the diocese of Augsburg and in Bueron, Memmingen and Burgau in the same diocese. During December they were burnt and killed on the feast of St Nicholas [6 December] in Lindau, on 8 December in Reutlingen, on 13 December in Haigerloch, and on 20 December in Horw they were burnt in a pit. And when the wood and straw had been consumed, some Jews, both young and old, still remained half alive. The stronger of them snatched up cudgels and stones and dashed out the brains of those trying to creep out of the fire, and thus compelled those who wanted to escape the fire to descend to hell. And the curse seemed to be fulfilled: 'his blood be upon us and upon our children'.

On 27 December the Jews in Esslingen were burnt in their houses and in the synagogue. In Nagelten they were burnt. In the abovesaid town of Zofingen the city councillors, who were hunting for poison, found some in the house of a Jew called Trostli, and by experiment were satisfied that it was poison. As a result, two Jewish men and one woman were put on the wheel, but others were saved at the command of Duke Albrecht of Austria, who ordered that they should be protected. But this made little difference, for in the course of the next year those he had under his protection were killed, and as many again in the diocese of Constance. But first those burnt in 1349 will be described in order.

Once started, the burning of the Jews went on increasing. When people discovered that the stories of poisoning were undoubtedly true they rose as one against the Jews. First, on 2 January 1349 the citizens of Ravensburg burnt the Jews in the castle, to which they had fled in search of protection from King Charles, whose servants were imprisoned by the citizens after the burning. On 4 January the people of Constance shut up the Jews in two of their own houses, and then burnt 330 of them in the fields at sunset on 3 March. Some processed to the flames dancing, others singing and the rest weeping. They were burnt shut up in a house which had been specially built for the purpose. On 12 January in Buchen and on 17 January in Basel they were all burnt apart from their babies, who were taken from them by the citizens and baptised. They were burnt on

21 January in Messkirch and Waldkirch, on 25 January in Speyer, and on 30 January in Ulm, on 11 February in Überlingen, on 14 February in the city of Strassburg (where it took six days to burn them because of the numbers involved), on 16 February in Mengen, on 19th of the month in Sulgen, on 21st in Schaffhausen and Zurich, on 23rd in St Gallen and on 3 March in Constance, as described above, except for some who were kept back to be burnt on the third day after the Nativity of the Virgin [11 September].

They were killed and burnt in the town of Baden on 18 March, and those in the castle below, who had been brought there from Rheinfelden for protection, were killed and then burnt. And on 30 May they were similarly wiped out in Radolfzell. In Mainz and Cologne they were burnt on 23 August. On 18 September 330 Jews were burnt in the castle at Kyburg, where they had gathered from Winterthur and Diessenhoven and the other towns of their protector the Duke of Austria. But the imperial citizens did not want to go on supporting them any longer, and so they wrote to Duke Albrecht of Austria, who was protecting his Jewish subjects in the counties of Pfirt, Alsace and Kyburg, and told him that either he had them burnt by his own judges or they would burn them themselves. So the Duke ordered them to be burnt by his own judges, and they were finally burnt on 18 September.

And thus, within one year, as I said, all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt – and in Austria they await the same fate, for they are accursed of God. And I could believe that the end of the Hebrews had come, if the time prophesied by Elias and Enoch were now complete; but since it is not complete, it is necessary that some be reserved so that what has been written may be fulfilled: that the hearts of the sons shall be turned to their fathers, and of the fathers to the sons. But in what parts of the world they may be reserved I do not know, although I think it more likely that the seed of Abraham will be reserved in lands across the sea than in these people. So let me make an end of the Jews here.

Socio-Economic Impact of the Black Death

In many ways, the world was turned upside down for the survivors of the Black Death. With half of the population dead, the economic equilibrium of feudalism – which had favoured landlords for centuries – was suddenly turned on its head: with the death of tenants, land was now more freely available and rents fell; with the death of labourers, workers were now in demand so wages rose; and with the death of so many people, demand for foodstuffs declined, so prices fell. This led to what has been described as the ‘golden age of the wage labourer’, with those lower down the social order able to enjoy higher living standards than ever before. It also led to changing dynamics between landlords and peasants and, arguably, paved the way for the decline of serfdom in the second half of the fourteenth century. When reading the following sermon on sin, think about some of the following questions:

- How far did peasants become more assertive?
- How far were elites worried about these peasant actions? And why?
- To what extent did the Black Death increase the opportunities for social mobility?
- In what ways did the Black Death fundamentally change medieval society?

The sin of pride and ambitions (pages 339-340 in Horrox, *Black Death*)

This brief extract comes from an anonymous fourteenth-century sermon. The preacher has structured his sermon around the seven beatitudes [Matthew 5] which he sees as seven rungs on the ladder of salvation. The extract is taken from his discussion of the first rung: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' [Matt. 5.3].

The first virtue is poverty of spirit, that is to say, humility of heart, and this is the foundation of all virtues and the first rung of this ladder.... Christ instructed us in this, saying, 'Learn of me, because I am meek, and humble of heart' and he continued, which is significant, 'and you shall find rest to your souls' [Matt. 11.29], which is as much as to say that the proud man does not have rest in his soul. Indeed, how can he, when he does not know what new fashion to follow; when he worries about precedence, not knowing whether to ride before or behind or when he can carry a weapon; always terrified that someone will gain more admiration than he; and never having a moment's peace while he can see a neighbour who exceeds him in status or respect. But the humble and meek of heart do not fret about such things, and therefore have rest in their souls, as Christ said, 'Learn of me etc. And you shall find rest to your souls'.

It is much to be regretted how few now follow this precept. Instead men prefer to learn the lesson of Lucifer – and then put it into practice. There is scarcely a villein today who is satisfied with his lot. Little men are always bustling about to make themselves the equals of their betters – or even, if they can wangle it somehow, to make themselves greater than them. This plague – by which I mean the plague of pride – is the mother and principal of all sin. It is capable of intoxicating a man's intelligence, so that he barely recognises himself. For if he gave serious thought to who he is, where he came from and where he is heading for, he would find precious little to glory in. For our proud man comes from nothing; he inhabits a body which will be nothing but dust and ashes, and food for worms; and his soul, in a state of mortal sin, will go to the devil. Look hard. This is hardly the stuff of glory!

Long-term Cultural Impact of the Black Death

Although we still remember the Black Death in popular imagination in modern society, the long-term cultural impact upon medieval society was acute. The disease did not respect rank, laying low peasants and nobles alike. The disease killed very quickly, often in a matter of days. And victims were often buried quickly, sometimes anonymously in mass grave pits. Nor did the Black Death prove to be the end for medieval Europe – instead, the disease became endemic, returning generation after generation for centuries to come. Medieval society arguably became obsessed with Death, ranging from the Dance of Death (Danse Macabre) iconography that became so popular in this period to the transi-tombs of the wealthy. When looking at the tomb below (and you can find more high quality versions online) have a think about the following questions:

- Why did medieval people wish to display their decaying bodies?
- How far was the transience of human life a key Christian belief prior to the Black Death?
- Did the Black Death change attitudes towards death itself?
- Why might the disease have had a disproportionately larger cultural impact than others?

Tomb of Archbishop Henry Chichele, c. 1443

On the tomb, reads an inscription: 'Whosoever you are who will pass by, I ask for remembrance from you, you who will be like me, you who will afterwards die, horrible in everything – dust, worms, vile flesh.'



The Impact of Covid-19

As a concluding thought, think about how we 'know' the past. Many of you may find yourself reading E.H. Carr's book *What is History?*. If you do, think about his instruction to 'study the historian before you begin to study the facts': history is constructed by historians rather than discovered by them. Historical 'facts' are not like 'fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use'. In slightly less nautical terms, how has the way historians approach history and the sources and methods used by them affected our understanding of the Black Death? Or put another way, how might the impact of covid-19 upon our society shape our future study of one of the worst pandemics in documented human history?

To find out more about medieval society, take a look at the British Library's online articles available here: <https://www.bl.uk/the-middle-ages>