

## The Black Death and how it changed Europe

During the Dark Ages, religious dogma was law, science was heresy punishable by death, and technology was seen as the handiwork of the devil. History and the public consciousness remembers the Dark Ages for the above traits, as well as the Crusades, which were little more than thinly-veiled examples of European imperialist goals. However, there is one other major event from the Dark Ages that, in its own way, had a major impact on modern culture. In fact, one widespread bacterial infection has, arguably, had an even greater effect than most other events of the time. One little bacterial infection wiped out nearly half of Europe, leaving it wide open for the subsequent invasion of the Genghis Khan's Mongol hordes. That same pandemic infection also left Europe in such a weakened state that it took most of the larger powers almost a century to recover, with some historians believing that the continent never fully rebuilt itself. One little bacterial infection turned into a massive pandemic, spawned a number of heretical Christian groups, indirectly caused the formation of the Inquisition, left the Old World crippled for decades afterwards, and may have caused a wholesale slaughter of cats. Amazing that one little infection could be so easily remembered in history as the Black Death. The Black Death was perhaps the greatest disaster to have befallen Europe since Rome was sacked by the Huns, who were followed shortly by the Visigoths. The most persistent impact clearly was the decimation of Europe, with estimated death tolls ranging from a third of the population to more than half the continent. The horrors were recounted by numerous sources from the period, which paint an unpleasant picture of a once-powerful continent brought low by an act of God. However, more than the death toll and the strategic impact, one might contend that the Plague left Europe with a climate of fear and anxiety that haunted Europeans for years, especially since lesser outbreaks occurred for centuries afterwards. Art and literature are permeated with references to the sweeping death by the generation that survived it, leading some early Renaissance works to be dominated by *Le Danse Macabre*, the dance of death. The clergy of the time, seen by the people as unable to fulfill their promises of banishing the plague by the power of God, lost much of their hold on the European people. In addition, the ranks of the clergymen were easily ravaged by the Black Death, forcing the Vatican to install ill-mannered and poorly-trained replacements. This action caused the people to lose even more faith in the church, with power moving into the hands of heretical groups. As the plague receded and the heresies' rise to power slowed, Christian authorities established the full wrath of the Inquisition. In what some might see as a fine example of dark humor, the Black Death also showed just how quickly the mob can resort to ridiculous measures when gripped with fear and anxiety. At a time when faith in God was still strong, despite wavering faith in His clergymen, cats were seen as the agents of the devil. There are hundreds of reports of healthy citizens attacking and slaughtering cats, their fear and anxiety having made them susceptible to the suggestion that cats carried the miasma, the poisonous air that carried the plague. Naturally, with a stark drop in the cat population, the rat population increased, and with those rats, so came the bacteria that caused the plague. Perhaps the greatest effect of the plague was that it was critical in the social reforms that would come in the years to follow. The Catholic Church, having lost much power because of it, had fractured enough to allow for groups to challenge its power. The people became less willing to follow the edicts of clergymen, as well as political figures who had close ties with the Church. In fact, one might argue that there is a mild correlation between the rise of more secular authority figures and the Black Death's onset. Many historians have even gone so far as to argue that the basic principles of capitalism were formed when the various aristocrats of Europe were forced to compete with one another for the services of surviving peasants and serfs. In the end, countless changes can be attributed to the Black Death. Some, like Europe's overall military frailty at the charge of the Mongol Hordes, are direct, while others, such as the Reformation and the Renaissance, are more indirect. However, one effect cannot be disputed. The fear and anxiety caused by the Black Death had permanently changed the economic, social, and political landscape of Europe, such that Europe might have evolved differently had it not been for a simple bacterial infection.

## About the Author

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