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The Black Death

In the mid-1300s, a fast-moving plague swept across Asia, North Africa, and Europe, killing an estimated 100 million. It caused so much fear and destruction that it earned the name “The Black Death.” But how did this pandemic come about?

The Black Death wasn’t the first recorded instance of plague. In the sixth century, an outbreak of bubonic plague struck the Byzantine Empire. Named after the emperor at the time, the Plague of Justinian eventually caused a pandemic that spread throughout the Mediterranean and was one of the contributing factors of the decline of the Byzantine Empire. The first plague pandemic ended in the mid-700s, but the same bacteria would lead to the Black Death 800 years later.

With the expansion of international trading during the High and Late Middle Ages, travel between different countries, especially along the Silk Road, became more common. The trade routes carried goods like silk, spices, gems, and fruit from China all the way to Europe, and back again. They also carried languages, religions, ideas—and disease. Many researchers believe that the Black Death was transmitted from infected fleas and rats that boarded trade ships. The plague made its way from Central Asia to Europe, killing millions of people along the way. But the Black Death had particularly devastating effects in Western Europe.

In the 13th century, Europe experienced an economic boom. Agricultural advancements and the abundance of harvest led to population growth. But by the 14th century, Europe was feeling the effects of overpopulation as cities became more crowded and resources dwindled. People became more susceptible to disease from malnutrition and from living in close proximity to each other. When the plague made its way to the ports of Europe in 1347, it spread rapidly and aggressively, affecting both humans and animals. And over the following five years, the Black Death killed more than 25 million people—almost $\frac{1}{3}$ of Europe’s population at the time.

The staggering death toll caused widespread fear and panic. People didn’t know how to prevent or treat the plague. To make sense of it, many people turned to their Christian faith. Some believed that the plague was a

punishment from God, while others sought scapegoats. Jewish communities were falsely accused of starting the plague, leading to a wave of antisemitism in which many Jews were persecuted.

In 1351, the plague's spread slowed significantly as quarantine efforts were put into place. People who were sick were isolated in plague hospitals, and ships were required to remain at ports for 30 to 40 days to ensure that passengers were not infected. But by then, the rapid population decline had already begun to cause societal changes. Due to labor shortages, services provided by people became more valuable. Lower-class laborers were able to negotiate better working conditions and wages, resulting in increased social mobility and the weakening of feudalism.

It took hundreds of years for Europe to recover from the catastrophic effects of the Black Death. The bubonic plague continued to resurface several times around the globe over the following centuries. It is estimated that the plague has killed about 200 million people worldwide.

In 1855, the third plague pandemic started in China and spread to nearly every continent through trade ports. But this was the last major outbreak of the plague. With a better scientific understanding of the disease and developments in medicine, the first plague vaccine was developed by Waldemar Haffkine in 1897.

Today, the plague is rare and is mostly curable by modern antibiotics and treatments. But historians and scientists continue to study the effects of past pandemics in hopes of better preparing for and mitigating the impact of future outbreaks.