
The Black Death: How Different Were Christian and Muslim Responses?

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A Document Based Question (DBQ)
World History

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Introduction

Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish.... The entire inhabited world changed.

—Ibn Khaldun, fourteenth century
Muslim historian

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It was known as the Great Pestilence, the Great Plague, and the Black Death. Wherever it struck it brought fear and unimaginable heart-break. By 1346 European traders had begun hearing rumors about great cataclysms that were wreaking havoc in China which included a fearful plague. Little did they know that this plague was already moving quickly along the same trade routes they themselves used and would soon be on the doorstep of the Middle East and Europe. In five short years, it would kill between 25 and 45% of the populations it encountered. It would be the worst natural disaster and the single most destructive natural phenomenon in the history of the world.

Causes and Symptoms

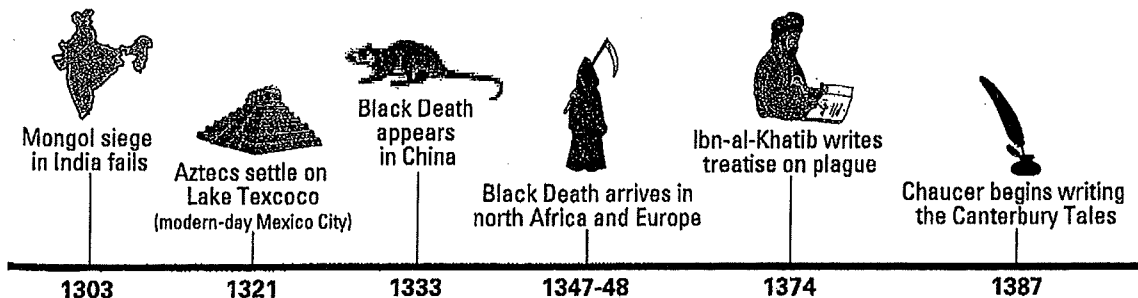
From Cairo to Paris, medical knowledge in the 14th century was primitive compared to today. Bacteria and viruses were largely unknown to doctors. They were certainly unknown to the general public. Although the causes of the plague are still debated by historians today, most believe the Black Death was caused by bacterial strains. These strains live in the stomach of certain fleas which live in the fur of rodents,

particularly the black rat. Through a complicated process it is possible for these bacteria strains to become unstable in the fleas. If this occurs, the fleas then infect the rats. When the rats die, the fleas will fly to another host. If that new host is human, a plague epidemic will erupt. By the mid-14th century a complex trading network connecting Asia to the Middle East and to all of Europe spread migrating rats and their parasitic fleas across much of the known world.

The Black Death was actually a combination of three plagues from three bacterial strains: **bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic**. The most common was bubonic. Symptoms included chills, high fever, delirium, vomiting, and rapid heartbeat. The infected person would then develop inflamed swellings filled with pus referred to as "buboes." Buboes could be as large as eggs and usually appeared in the armpit or groin area. These buboes were extremely painful and within three to six days of their appearance, 50 to 80% of the victims died. Pneumonic plague was less common but more deadly; it infected the respiratory system and killed most of its victims, usually in hours. The third strain, septicemic plague, infected the bloodstream and killed all of its victims. No matter which form, plague resulted in a horrible and agonizing death.

The History of the Plague

The 14th century was not the first time plague had spread across parts of the world, and it was not to be the last. The first documented plague lasted from 541 to 544 CE. Known as the Plague of Justinian, scholars believe it



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originated in East Africa and spread to the Middle East. The Plague of Justinian greatly weakened the Byzantine Empire, but had little effect on the rest of Europe and Asia.

Expanded trading networks assured that the next onslaughts of the plague would be even more deadly. And so it was when the Black Death charged across 14th century Asia, Europe

downtrodden, Christ preached about brotherly love and the "golden rule," to "do unto others as you would have done unto you." He established a following of **disciples** who came to view him as the son of the one and only God. The Romans who ruled Judea were threatened by Christ's popularity and had him crucified on a cross, thus martyring Christ in the minds of his disciples. The

cross became the symbol of Christ, and his disciples began spreading his teachings around the region. The disciples, who were also Jewish, added writings to the Jewish Bible (or Old Testament) that came to be known as the New Testament. Over the next 400 years an institutional church was established in Rome, led by the Pope. The Church taught that people were born in a state of original sin and



14th-century woodcut showing plague victims in front of a church

and north Africa. But even when the Black Death played itself out in 1351, the plague was not finished. It continued to strike the world in a series of waves, revisiting Europe into the eighteenth century and Asia and Africa into the twentieth century.

When the Black Death struck Europe and the Middle East in the mid-14th century, religion was the most powerful force in the lives of most people. In this region of the world, two religions predominated, Christianity and Islam. Before we proceed to compare and contrast the responses of each faith to the plague, a basic review of Christian and Muslim beliefs is in order.

Christianity

Christianity had its origins with Jesus Christ in the first century of the Common Era. Christ was a Jew from Judea in today's Israel. A charismatic leader who connected with the

needed the help of the Church to receive redemption from God. Christians spread their religion throughout Europe. When the Black Death arrived on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean in 1348, most Europeans were Christian.

Islam

In the early 7th century in Mecca, a city in today's Saudi Arabia, a man named Mohammed claimed he had received the word of God (**Allah**) and called on the people to submit to Him (the word "**Islam**" means "submission to God" in Arabic). Mohammed's teachings about how people should treat each other were similar to Christ's, but the underlying duty of all Muslims (followers of Islam) was the submission to Allah. These teachings appealed to poorer people and angered the wealthy. By 622 Mohammed and his followers were forced to flee to nearby Medina. He continued his teachings

and felt directed by God to write the **Koran**, the book that contains Islam's fundamental beliefs. These beliefs rest on five pillars: the profession of faith to Allah, daily prayer, charity, fasting, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. By 630 Mohammed had gained a huge following and was able to return to Mecca to convert the city. He died in 632, but his followers spread Islam quickly. Within two decades of Mohammed's death most of Arabia was converted, and by the fourteenth century, Islam stretched from North Africa to India.

The Question

In 1348 Christianity and Islam came face to face with the Black Death. It was an unprecedented challenge: how would their followers react to the disease? Would they turn

to religion for hope and direction? Or, would followers turn away from religion out of anger and despair? In truth, Muslims and Christians responded in many different ways. However, there are some generalizations that can be made about how the followers of each religion responded to the Black Death.

You will have 17 documents to analyze. Your job is to examine each document and then use that information to answer the following question: *The Black Death: How different were Christian and Muslim responses?*

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Document A

Source: Adapted from Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Paths of the Black Death

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