11.7 How did the Black Death change society?

Between 1347 and 1351, the Black Death had a brutal effect on life in Europe and the area surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Despite all the devastation, there were also some positive changes in the following years, many of which occurred as a direct response to the horrors of the plague.

Changes to medicine

The failure of medieval medicine to successfully treat the victims of the plague led to changes in the practice of medicine in the years following the Black Death. Before this time, hospitals were places where sick people were sent to be isolated. When people entered a hospital, all their possessions were disposed of because no one expected them to survive. During the period of the Black Death, doctors began to try to cure patients placed in hospital, and this practice continued after the plague had gone. Some hospitals began to develop relationships with universities and collect libraries of medical texts. An increased emphasis on medical knowledge led to more dissections of human corpses, and so improvements in the knowledge of anatomy and surgical practices soon followed.

Sanitation and public health

In a number of places, authorities became more aware of the need to take responsibility for the health of the population. In Italian cities such as Venice and Milan, public health boards were set up to deal with the plague, and these continued after the disease had moved on. These boards gradually gained extra powers and became a valuable means of preventing the spread of illness. In London, the city council brought in regulations to clean up the city. Laws to prevent littering, the employment of street sweepers and heavy fines for dumping waste in the river were all implemented in the years following the Black Death.

Religion

The devastation of the Black Death weakened the influence of the previously all-powerful Catholic Church. The inability of religious leaders to deal with the plague through prayer and the fact that so many priests had died of the disease led to many people losing respect for the Church. In the 1360s and 1370s, an English theologian John Wycliffe wrote a number of works critical of the papacy and of the role of monasteries in society. He gained a strong following among people whose recent experiences had led them to question the power and influence of the Catholic Church in society. Many of Wycliffe’s followers were executed for heresy.

Political unrest

The huge decline in the numbers of peasants and agricultural workers meant there were fewer people left to perform these tasks. This meant that peasants were able to demand higher wages. However, these demands were often resisted by those in power. Peasants and workers in various parts of Europe rose up to demand their rights in the years following the Black Death.

In France in 1358, a group of workers called the Jacquerie rose up in revolt to try and improve their working conditions. In 1378 a group of workers in the wool industry, who were known as the anticapi, led a revolt in Florence where they managed to force some democratic government reforms for a brief time. In England, causes of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 (see chapter 4) can be traced back to the changes in society that resulted from the Black Death.

Language

In England before the Black Death, most educated people spoke Latin or French. The death of large numbers of educated monks and other scholars meant that schools had to resort to English as the language of instruction. By the 1380s, poets such as Geoffrey Chaucer were publishing their works in what is now referred to as Middle English (see Source 3). Chaucer is considered by many to be the Father of English literature.

And whom I saw he wolde never fere
To rede on this cursed book at night,
Al sonehit three leves have I plight
Out of his book right as he rede, and eke
I with my list so took him on the cheeke
That in oure fier he felle backward adown:
And up he sterte as dooth a wood leon
And with his fist he smote me on the heed.
That in the floor lye as I were dead.
And when he sawh what stille that I lay,
He was agast, and wolde have fle his way,
Tille atte laste out of my sowgh I braide:
"O hastou slain me, false blynde?"
I sayde,
"And for my land thus hastou mordred me?
"Er I be deied, yit wol I kisse thee."

Source 1
As shown in this fourteenth-century illustration, the desire of doctors to find out more about the human body led to an increase in dissections, which improved knowledge of human anatomy.

Source 2
The Jacquerie uprising in 1358 was an attempt by French workers to improve their conditions.

Source 3
The decline in the use of Latin and French in England led to increased use of a form of English, such as in this extract of a poem by Chaucer.

Activities

EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION
1. How did the experience of the Black Death change the ways in which hospitals operated?
2. Describe an example of action taken in London to improve sanitation and public health after the plague had moved on.
3. Why did many people begin to lose respect for the Church after the Black Death?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES
4. a. Describe what is happening in Source 1.
   b. List the differences in the way this activity is depicted in the source compared with how it would be performed today.
5. a. What appears to be happening in Source 2?
   b. Where else did similar uprisings take place?
6. The extract from a poem by Chaucer in Source 3 is written in what we now call Middle English. Although it is a form of the language that is unfamiliar to us, it is still recognisable as English.
   a. Identify the words in the poem that are the same as modern English words.
   b. Identify the words that are similar to modern English words and give their equivalent.
   c. List any words that seem completely unrecognisable. Suggest possible meanings for these words based on the context.
   d. After analysing the language, summarise what you think this poem is about.

CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS
7. The coinage in Italy managed to gain some “democratic” reforms in the government of their city. Give an example of what you think might be a “democratic” reform.

heresy any religious opinion that differed from that of the Roman Catholic Church
theologian a person who is considered to be an expert in religious matters
11.8 Weakening the feudal system

The dominant form of social and economic organisation in Europe in the Middle Ages was the feudal system. The massive drop in population that occurred as a result of the Black Death was to change the relationship between landowners and those who worked the land. This change severely weakened the feudal system in the following decades.

Huge decline in population

It is estimated that approximately 25 million people died in Europe during the period of the Black Death. This represents a decline in the population between thirty and fifty per cent in the years 1347 to 1351. The earlier outbreak in Hubei, China is said to have caused the death of 5 million, or 90 per cent of the population. Later outbreaks in China in 1353-54 are believed to have killed almost two-thirds of the Chinese population. In the Middle East the effects seem to have been less devastating, although still very significant. It has been estimated that less than one-third of the population was killed by the plague across the Middle East, although some local areas suffered a higher death rate.

New power for the peasants

Under the feudal system, peasants had been tied to the land and were expected to work the land their families had worked for generations before. The sudden loss of millions of peasants across Europe left many estates with insufficient numbers to work the land. This led to some wealthy landowners offering increased payment to agricultural labourers in other areas to entice them to their estates. Peasants suddenly found they had bargaining power, and in some places wages doubled in the space of one year. At the same time, prices fell for many goods because the number of customers had declined so dramatically. The decrease in available farm workers led many land holders to move away from growing crops and to increase the keeping of livestock, such as sheep and cattle, as this required fewer farm workers.

Changes in the social class structure

Under the traditional feudal system peasants had kept part of the crop as payment for their labour. By the end of the fourteenth century money wages became a more significant part of peasant earnings. This often meant that peasants and their families had money to spend on goods that had previously been available only to the wealthy. As the population began to recover, there was a gradual rise in the number of people becoming merchants and shopkeepers in response to this increase in demand.

Skilled trades open up

Before the Black Death most of the skilled craftsmen and tradesmen such as bakers, blacksmiths and stonemasons had entered their trades because of family connections. The huge death toll meant that many craftsmen had to look outside their own families for apprentices to train. This often led to the sons of peasants gaining access to a trade and the potential wealth and status this would bring.

Growth in the middle class

Previously, society had been made up primarily of a wealthy landowning upper class and a relatively poor peasant lower class. The increase in the number of people involved in business, crafts and trades brought about the growth of a middle class, particularly in some of the rapidly growing towns. Many historians believe the increasing importance of the middle class in some European countries occurred more quickly because of the Black Death.

An opposing view

In recent years, some historians have suggested that the changes to the feudal system and growth of the middle class would have happened without the Black Death. They argue that the population was in decline before 1347 because of crop failures and famine. They also point out that the plague returned to Europe many times over the next three hundred years. Although these later incidents did not bring such a high death toll in as short a time, they did keep the population low. Some historians argue that the effects of the Black Death from 1347 to 1351 have been exaggerated in previous historical studies.

Activities

EXPLANATION AND COMUNICATION
1. What proportion of the population is estimated to have died during the Black Death in: a. Europe b. China c. the Middle East?
2. How did the decline in population open up opportunities for peasants who had previously been tied to one estate under the feudal system?
3. In what ways did farming practice change after the Black Death?

ANALYZE AND USE OF SOURCES
4. How does the Black Death appear to have contributed to the development of markets, such as that shown in Source 1? How would you describe the people at this market?
5. Examine Source 2. Why did access to apprenticeships become possible for members of the peasant class after the Black Death? How do we know that the tradesman depicted has a prosperous business?

CHRONOLOGY, TERMS AND CONCEPTS
6. What do we mean when we refer to a middle class in medieval society?
7. Give four examples of occupations that would have been carried out by middle class people during the Late Middle Ages?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS
8. From the information in this spread, and from what you have learned about the Middle Ages this year, how important do you think the Black Death was in the weakening of the feudal system and the growth of the middle class in late medieval Europe?