



# The Plague



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It was a disease that would turn the world upside down, and it spread faster than it could be understood. The “Black Death” that raged through the world during the Middle Ages was the most devastating infectious disease recorded in human history. By the time the Plague had finally loosened its death grip, it had claimed the lives of nearly half of the world’s population in less than five years. This special presentation, *The Plague*, offers two compelling perspectives on the ravages of this disease. Journals and personal narratives from the 14th century take viewers inside the world of the disease as those who lived through it attempted to make sense of its origins and significance amidst the chaos of its terror. These voices of perplexed horror and fear are answered by contemporary historians and scientists who help us understand the sources of the Plague and assess the long-term effects of this chilling pandemic.

This two-hour documentary traces the spread of this disease by describing both the methods of transmission, and the path of infection as those who traversed trade routes unknowingly carried it throughout the world. As the uncontrollable infections spiraled throughout Europe, hysteria ensued. Those looking to place blame laid responsibility at the door of God, at Jews, and at one another, without any true explanation to comfort them. *The Plague* chronicles the staggering effects of this disease on European society, analyzing the ways that these unexpected events in the 1340s altered the world forever. Insights are drawn from first-person accounts from Pope Clement VI, Princess Joan of England, Agimet, a Jewish servant to a wealthy Swiss nobleman, and French physician Guy de Chauliac. Educators and their students will be riveted by these dramatic testimonies, and the conclusions this program draws about the transformations which followed in the wake of this cataclysmic disease.



## curriculum links

*The Plague* would be useful for World History, Global Studies, Health, Geography, and Science and Technology courses. It is appropriate for middle school and high school viewers. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education:

- (1) Civilization, cultural diffusion and innovation,
- (2) Human interaction with the environment,
- (3) Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions,
- (4) Conflict and cooperation, and
- (5) Patterns of social and political interaction.

## vocabulary

Students should identify the following terms. Visit [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com) for definitions.

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|----------------------|-------------------|
| <b>apocalypse</b>    | <b>inured</b>     |
| <b>doctrine</b>      | <b>papacy</b>     |
| <b>expansion</b>     | <b>pestilence</b> |
| <b>famine</b>        | <b>prosperity</b> |
| <b>indoctrinated</b> | <b>troubadour</b> |

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## discussion questions

1. What was the status of life in Europe in terms of faith, technology, and trade before the Plague arrived?
2. Where do historians believe the Plague originated? What were the primary methods of its transmission?
3. What changes in society do you think could have played a role in the rapid spread of the Plague?
4. Do you think the spread of the Plague was inevitable? If not, what could have been done to prevent its spread, and by whom?
5. What was the philosophy of the “flagellants”? Why do you think their method of dealing with the Plague was appealing to so many people?
6. What were some of the explanations people gave for what the Plague was and why it had arrived? Which reason do you think would have made the most sense to you at the time?
7. Why do you think so many Europeans blamed others for the Plague? What does this say about their understanding of disease?
8. In what ways did the Plague alter the relationship between humans and their faith in God? Explain your answer.
9. How did the Plague affect concepts of authority and social class?
10. What sources have historians used in order to learn more about the Plague? Which of these sources do you think are the most accurate? Which do you think are the most revealing?
11. What were the long-term ramifications of the Plague? How did it transform European society and medical knowledge?
12. Do you think a disease as devastating as the Plague could spread today? Why or why not?

## extended activities

1. **Charting History:** The Plague which ravaged the world in the 1340s had tremendous social, political, and philosophical effects. This documentary traces the causes and consequences of the disease as well as the worldviews of those who experienced its powerful spread. Break students up into groups of four or five. Based on this program, and their own library or Internet research, ask students to create a posterboard or PowerPoint presentation which charts the following: 1) Causes of the Plague 2) Explanations/ Reactions to its spread, and 3) Consequences of the Plague. These posters can be designed using images or artwork depicting the disease and its effects. If possible, students should also include a map charting the areas of the world hit by the Plague. Students should present their findings to the larger class and participate in a class discussion of the meaning of the Plague.
2. **Policing the Plague:** During the Plague era, political leaders attempted to stem the spread

of the disease by passing local ordinances demanding that people abide by certain sanitation and civil codes. Ask students to imagine that they have been given the task of writing these ordinances for a small European city suffering from the Plague. Have students write the ten ordinances they would enact, with a short introduction to the residents of the city describing the reason for the ordinances. Have students share their ordinances with the class. The class may want to choose the ordinances they think are most useful and create a master list together.

3. **Heretics or Heroes?:** The flagellant movement represents one of the most drastic responses to the spread of the Plague. Believing that self-punishment for their sins might help save them from the doom of the Plague, the followers of this movement were regarded as a dangerous threat to church authority. Divide the class into four groups: church leaders, the flagellants, experts for both sides, and judges. Have these groups



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## extended activities

Imagine that the flagellants are on trial for heresy. Have each group prepare testimony and a rationale for their beliefs, with the judges put in charge of administering the trial. The flagellants should argue the position that they have the right to exist and invite followers; the church leaders should charge heresy; the witnesses should provide commentary to support one of these sides; and the judges should determine which group has made the most compelling arguments.

- 4. A Medical Model:** The French physician Guy de Chauliac conducted some of the first scientific experiments designed to find the origins of the Plague and possible cures for the disease. Based on what they learn from viewing this documentary, ask students to imagine they are de Chauliac. Have them write a journal entry or newspaper editorial describing why he believes a scientific explanation and solution to the Plague is possible.

## websites&books

### websites

The Center for Disease Control's website on the Plague, with history and background:  
[www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/plague/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/plague/index.htm)

The BBC's excellent site on the history and consequences of the Black Death:  
[www.bbc.co.uk/history/society\\_culture/welfare/black\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/society_culture/welfare/black_01.shtml)

Links and additional readings on the Mongol empire:  
[www.historymedren.about.com/od/mongoltopics](http://www.historymedren.about.com/od/mongoltopics)

A wonderful lesson plan with activities and information geared toward young readers:  
[www.schoolhistory.co.uk/year8links/plague/Plaguebooklet.pdf](http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/year8links/plague/Plaguebooklet.pdf)

### books

Cantor, Norman. *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (Harper Perennial, 2002).

Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

Holmes, George (editor). *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2002).

Kelly, John. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, The Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (HarperCollins, 2005).



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