

How the Black Death Affected Europe

Substantial changes in population often have dramatic effects on society. The bubonic plague, which in just four years killed up to one third of the people in Europe, almost literally turned Europe's social structure upside down.

Life in the Middle Ages centered around a hierarchy called the feudal system. Noble lords lived in castles or manors, which were surrounded by acres of land. The nobles depended on peasants to farm their land. In turn, peasants received protection, shelter, and a small plot of land to plant their own crops. According to the Christian Church, the feudal system was God's plan, and no one questioned the authority of the church.

In the 300 years before the Black Death, the European population tripled. Additional land was cultivated, but food was still scarce. Some peasants left for a better life in the city, where merchants and craftsmen were beginning to thrive. The now-crowded cities, however, could not handle the overflow of unskilled laborers.

After gunpowder was invented, the lords had found it harder to defend their castles. They also experienced some bad harvests, and many had to cope with the consequences of a war between France and England. Yet, they remained in control.

Then, without warning, the Black Death swept through Western Europe, killing 25 million people. Some families were wiped out. Large estates were left without heirs. Survivors moved in and claimed any property they could find. Cities and towns lost people by the thousands. Monasteries, which previously had as many as 150 monks, now had only seven or eight. In all, thousands of villages were abandoned.

Agriculture was also in disarray. The tools and land were there, but suddenly the workers were missing. Food prices dropped, and there was even a surplus of food where once many had barely had enough to stay alive.

Because workers were scarce, peasants who survived the plague now had bargaining power for the first time. Resentment among the working class led to violence and revolt in the centuries that followed, as Europe teetered between the old feudal system and a new economic system.

The shortage of skilled craftsmen caused an industrial crisis. Unlike agricultural workers, craftsmen require long apprenticeships, and now there were few replacements when any skilled artisan died. Reduced production forced prices of saddles, farm tools, and other goods to soar.

This depopulation crisis, however, encouraged technological developments. The most notable labor-saving invention was the printing press, developed around 1450. One such press replaced hand-copying by hundreds of scribes.

The Black Death affected the entire medieval social structure. When the pestilence returned a few years later, people were even more terrified. Its unpredictable recurrence in the following decades was enough to keep Europeans in constant fear. A mood of gloom swept across Europe, and many began to question the authority of the church. In fact, they began to have doubts about their entire world view. Yet, it was this questioning that led to far-reaching reforms in religion, art, medicine, and science. Without a doubt, the Black Death forever changed Europe's economic and social structure.

Countless monks succumbed to the plague as it swept across Europe. The survivors soon became part of the sweeping changes that led to the Renaissance, the great revival based on classical sources of art, literature, and learning in Europe (1300s-1500s).