

## DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Trade and the Plague

## The Perils of Interaction

*Interaction across the entire Eurasian landmass brought  
the plague to Europe. How did Europe respond?*



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## *Debating* the DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints  
in Primary Source Documents

# Trade and the Plague The Perils of Interaction

The 2017 World History Course and Exam Description of the College Board Advanced Placement Program\* lists five themes that it urges teachers to use in organizing their teaching. Each World History *Debating the Documents* booklet focuses on one or two of these five themes.

### *The Five Themes*

- 1. Interaction between humans and the environment.** (demography and disease; migration; patterns of settlement; technology)
- 2. Development and interaction of cultures.** (religions; belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies; science and technology; the arts and architecture)
- 3. State-building, expansion, and conflict.** (political structures and forms of governance; empires; nations and nationalism; revolts and revolutions; regional, transregional, and global structures and organizations)
- 4. Creation, expansion, and interaction of economic systems.** (agricultural and pastoral production; trade and commerce; labor systems; industrialization; capitalism and socialism)
- 5. Development and transformation of social structures.** (gender roles and relations; family and kinship; racial and ethnic constructions; social and economic classes)

### *This Booklet's Main Theme:*

- 1** Interaction between humans and the environment.

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# Teacher Introduction

## ★ Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,  
conflicting  
perspectives are  
among the truths  
of history.  
No single  
objective or  
universal account  
could ever put an  
end to this endless  
creative dialogue  
within and  
between the past  
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

#### **Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes**

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

### ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

#### **1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.**

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

#### **2. Have students do the worksheets.**

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

NOTE: If you are using these materials with an AP world history class, an honors class, or some other group of advanced and/or more knowledgeable students, you may want to make more written sources available to them on this topic. Do a basic Internet search for sources that provide additional perspectives and then add to the sources provided here.

### 3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

### 4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

#### **The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):**

Who did the Europeans blame for the plague, and why did they so badly misunderstand its causes?

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

## INTRODUCTION

### ★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

#### **Excellent Essay**

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

#### **Good Essay**

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Fair Essay**

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

#### **Poor Essay**

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in “laundry list” style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

# Suggestions to the Student

## ★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

## ★ *How to Use This Booklet*

### 1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



### 2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

### 3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

### 4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

### 5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

## *Trade and the Plague*

In 1347, European merchants in ports on the northern shore of the Black Sea were gripped with terror. In fear, they took to the sea and fled. Ashore, large numbers of people suddenly began to swell up, with darkly colored blotches covering their bodies. Most died within days, perishing by the thousands. The dark swellings were called “buboes,” hence the term for this epidemic—bubonic plague, or as it came to be called, the “Black Death.” Some researchers think the Black Death may also have included pneumonic plague, which affects the lungs.

The merchants and sailors had no real idea of what caused this horror. As they fled back to ports in southern France and Italy, they carried the disease with them. Bubonic plague is a bacillus found in rodents and is transmitted by fleas. The escaping ships—with rodents and fleas aboard—carried the deadly plague into the heart of Europe. As the disease spread north from Mediterranean ports, it devastated one region after another. In many places, 50 percent or more died within months. In some cases, whole villages were wiped out. Within just four years, Europe’s population declined by at least a third. Three centuries of steady growth and economic advancement were halted. Europe would not recover for a century or more.

The irony of the Black Death is that it was a result of a great step forward in human history. From around 1000 to 1300 CE, the major civilizations in Eurasia were increasingly linked together by several major trading networks. China under the Song Dynasty had become an economic powerhouse. Its trade by sea with Southeast Asia, India, Persia, and East Africa was extensive. By land, caravans linked China with Central Asia, Persia and Syria, the Caspian and Black Seas, the Mediterranean and Europe. They used a network of routes known as the “Silk Road,” named after the key luxury good carried over these routes. Meanwhile another trading system across the Sahara reached into many parts of

Africa. Trade along the Silk Road in particular had become much safer and easier after the Mongol conquests united much of the Eurasian landmass in the thirteenth century.

Due in part to these growing trade networks, Europe’s towns and cities revived, population and wealth grew, and imaginations stirred. After all, more than goods for sale traveled these routes. Ideas and cultural practices did as well. Ancient Greek writings and new ideas about science, tools, and techniques from many lands all passed along the trade routes, influencing many cultures in many ways. For Europe, all of these things contributed to a great awakening of culture and a time of rapid economic growth.

Unfortunately, along with these benefits came the Black Death. This massive outbreak of plague probably began in China in the 1330s. It was carried by rats and fleas riding along in caravans and ships heading west. That’s why Europeans trading in the Black Sea region were the first to encounter it. The Black Death arrived in Europe at a time when the climate was cooling. Bad weather had led to several years of poor crops and famine. People may have been weaker and less able to fight off diseases. In other words, a number of factors together helped to make the Black Death so massively destructive.

However, no one in the 1340s understood these actual causes of the epidemic. No one knew how germs on fleas could cause the horrifying death of millions. Instead, many just looked for someone or something to blame. After all, the Black Death seemed like a punishment or a blind act of hatred against all of humanity.

The growing interactions of Eurasian societies were complex and confusing. These sources focus on Europe and show how hard it was for people to cope with huge, life-altering changes, especially when they brought about a crisis no one could imagine or fully understand.

# Trade and the Plague Time Line

1206–1279

Temüjin unites Mongolian clans and tribes, receiving the title “Chinggis Khan” (or Ghengis Khan). The unified Mongols soon begin a wave of conquests throughout Asia. They take Persia by 1221, northern China by 1234, and Russia by 1241. In 1258, the Mongols seize Baghdad. By 1279, they complete the conquest of southern China. The Mongol Empire comes to control all of the Silk Road trading routes across Central Asia linking China with the Mediterranean. The term “Pax Mongolica” is sometimes used to describe the easier trade and communication this makes possible throughout Eurasia.

1260–1292

The greater ease of travel across Eurasia is illustrated by the adventures of the Polos. Between 1260 and 1269, Niccolo and his brother Maffeo travel to Mongolia. Then between 1271 and 1292, with Niccolo’s son Marco, they travel to China. Marco serves for many years in the government of the Great Khan who ruled China.

1279–1314

Nevertheless, the widespread Mongol destruction in China disrupts life and reduces farm output. This results in famines that kill millions and weaken the population as a whole. By the 1300s, meanwhile, three or four centuries of the Medieval Warm Period are ending. In Europe and elsewhere, the weather turns much harsher.

1315

Several years of harsh wet winters drastically reduce harvests and cause a terrible famine lasting from 1315–1317. As in China, this not only kills millions immediately, it leaves many others weakened with less ability to resist new diseases.

1334

Plague strikes the Chinese province of Hubei.

1338–1339

Excavations have indicated high death rates around Lake Issyk-Kul in Central Asia along the Silk Road trading routes.

1347

Plague is reported in Constantinople and Trebizond. An already plague-infected Mongol army besieges Caffa, a Genoese trading center on the Crimean peninsula in the Black Sea. The disease spreads to those in the besieged city. Genoese merchants flee, carrying the disease to Sicily and Italy.

1348

The Black Death reaches France and Germany. It also shows up in London.

1349

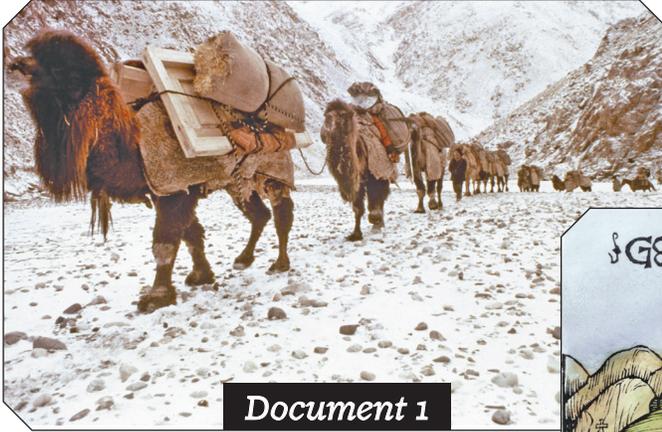
The Black Death reaches Norway, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.

1350–1351

Plague reaches Eastern Europe and Russia. It affects Poland little.

## DOCUMENTS 1 &amp; 2

## Visual Primary Source Documents 1 &amp; 2



Document 1

The Granger Collection, New York



Document 2

The Granger Collection, New York

## Information on Documents 1 &amp; 2

**Document 1.** A camel caravan makes its way through the Pamir Mountains in Afghanistan. The Silk Road routes date back to the Han Dynasty. With the Mongol conquests, however, they became much safer to use. The Mongols depended on goods from more-settled civilizations. They could tax merchant caravans as well. Hence, it became possible to travel the entire length of the routes in safety. As even this modern-day caravan suggests, however, it was also easy for rats and disease-carrying fleas to travel in safety as well.

**Document 2.** A 1493 German woodcut showing the harbor of Genoa, Italy. After 1000 CE, trade began to revive in Europe. Port cities in Italy (such as Genoa) thrived in part because they were in contact with Muslim merchants and others taking part in the trading networks of Eurasia. Smaller towns grew with little planning, spreading out from a castle or a cathedral, or in this case, from a seaport area. Sanitation was non-existent. Disease spread from ship to shore rapidly, without anyone really understanding how.