Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century

A Unit of Study for Grades 7–12

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

For generations, the Black Death left virtually no one untouched in Europe, parts of Asia, and northern Africa. From the available records it can be estimated that in the mid-fourteenth century during the first wave of the plague, Europe lost a third or more of its population. Recurrences at intervals of a few years or a few decades further decimated the demoralized survivors. Though outside of Europe documentary evidence for the plague is sparse, similar rates of mortality can be assumed from the evidence that does exist.

Fear of death infected all. Everyone was personally touched by the deaths of those around them: family, friends, neighbors, and those whose services were vital to the community; farmers, shopkeepers, craftspeople, clergy, teachers, laborers, officials, and governmental authorities of every kind. Medieval society had to adapt to, and cope with, the catastrophic situation. There is good reason for the claim that the Black Death was an event of major historical importance. This unit gives students an opportunity to grapple with the question of how and on the basis of what criteria, historical importance may be assessed.

The response of individuals and institutions to the crisis of the Black Death was shaped by, and in turn influenced, culture and society. Studying the plague and its impact hones understanding of the historical period during which it occurred. Because of its dramatic nature, and the extreme reactions it provoked, it also provides an unusually good opportunity for students to gain an empathetic rather than just an intellectual understanding of how the mind-sets of a remote time-period were both similar to and different from their own.

In a broader context, study of the Black Death will also alert students to the importance of demography, or the study of population, and will prepare them for consideration of other periods when demography played an important part in patterns of change.

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit deals with the causes, course, characteristics and results of the Black Death in the fourteenth century. It lends itself to teaching in a number of contexts. For instance, it could serve as part of a unit on the Middle Ages, as background to the Renaissance-Reformation period in Europe, or as an example of a historical process transcending political boundaries. It may also be used as a basis for comparison with other demographic events that had major historical consequences, such as the Indian population crash in the Americas after Europeans arrived there in the sixteenth-century.

III. Correlation to The National Standards for World History

Coping with Catastrophe provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, **World History Era 5**, "Intensified Hemispheric Interactions 1000-1500 CE," **Standards 5A** and **5B**. In addition, this unit addresses **Historical Thinking Standards 2**, "Historical Comprehension;" **3**, "Historical Analysis and Interpretation;" and **5**, "Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision Making."

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To further students' empathetic acquaintance with fourteenth century conditions of life and ways of thought, and how these were connected.

2. To help students analyze and appreciate the complexity of the causes and consequences of the Black Death.

3. To raise student awareness of the practical, psychological, and intellectual methods that individuals and institutions used to cope with catastrophic conditions, and how social, technological, and medical conditions of the times limited the methods available to them.

4. To alert students to the potential impact of rapid demographic change on society.

5. To give students experience at studying, analyzing, and comparing various kinds of historical evidence for reliability.

6. To encourage students to assess the historical significance of events such as the Black Death.

V. Lesson Plans

1. No Escape from Death: The Catastrophic Plague Arrives

2. Trying to Cope: Explanations and Counter-measures

3. The Impact on Society: Short and Long-range Consequences of the Population Crash

LESSON ONE
NO ESCAPE FROM DEATH: THE CATASTROPHIC PLAGUE ARRIVES

A. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the characteristics and course of the Black Death

2. To relate the spread of the Black Death to historical conditions of the time

3. To analyze ways that cultural characteristics may constrain the choices available to members of a society

4. To practice drawing inferences from information given on a map and in original sources and to assess their reliability as historical evidence

B. LESSON ACTIVITIES

Activity One: Map Interpretation

Distribute copies of the map, *Transmission of the Black Death* **Student Handout 1**. Use your choice of the following questions to guide the students' analyses of the map.

Discussion questions for *Spread of the Black Death*

1. Given the information on the map about the route and dates of arrival of the Black Death, information in the table of dates, and what you already know about medieval history and society, do you think that overall the infection was most likely to have been carried by armies, lords visiting their various manors, merchants, or pilgrims? For each possibility, suggest the area on the map where it was most likely to have been at least a contributory factor in transmission. What other methods of transmission might have played a part? What evidence can you give to support your hypotheses?

2. What information on the map might support a connection between population density and the presence of plague? What information would contradict this hypothesis?

3. What explanations might be given for the fact that it took the plague six years to move from Issyk Kul near the upper reaches of the Jaxartes River to Sarai on the Volga river, but only one year or so to advance from Sarai to Messina and another year from there to London? What evidence can you give to support your explanations?

4. How certain can you be that areas on the map to which the plague is not shown to have been transmitted (such as Arabia, West Africa, East Africa, and India west of the Indus River) were in fact spared? Explain your reasoning.

5. If you were a textbook editor with a tight budget and if map were expensive to print, would you include this map in your textbook? Why or why not?

Activity Two: Primary Source Interpretation

Have students read *Everyone Felt He Was Doomed to Die* (**Student Handout 2**) and *I Buried My Five Children* (**Student Handout 3**). Guide group or class discussions using the following questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Besides the fact of death itself, what other problems caused by the Black Death did Boccaccio and di Tura identify?

2. What characteristics of the Black Death were emphasized by the contemporary observers read so far (including those in the *Dramatic Moment*)?

3. From the evidence of the map and the original sources, what inferences could you draw about the influence of geography on the spread of plague? About the influence of human activities on the spread of plague? If you were a historian, what kinds of additional evidence would you try to find in order to support your inferences?

4. Given fourteenth-century conditions, what additional actions could have been taken to cope with the plague besides those described by the contemporary observers you have read so far?

5. What reasons can you give for accepting, and what reasons for doubting, the information given by Boccaccio and di Tura?

6. In your reaction to Boccaccio's and di Tura's accounts, what difference, if any, does it make that the two authors' outlook and purpose were different? That Boccaccio's account is part of a fictional book and that he did not speak from personal experience, while di Tura's chronicle is an eyewitness account? How acceptable is hearsay as historical evidence? How acceptable is fiction as historical evidence? For example, what might novels reveal about the historical period in which they were written? Defend your point of view.

Activity Three: Role Playing

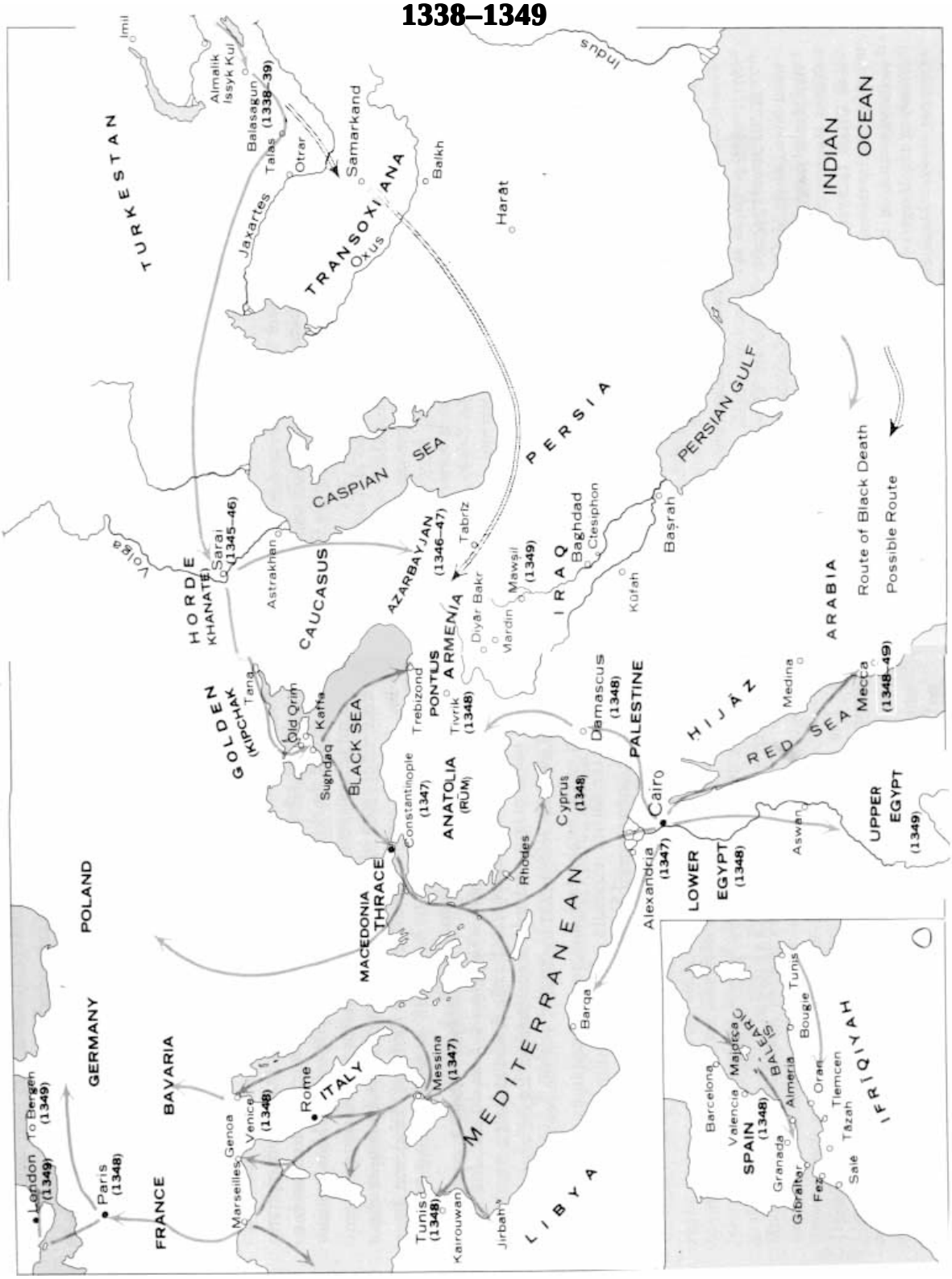
Role-play a conversation among members of a family in Florence in the summer of 1348, when the plague had taken hold but had not yet peaked. What features of their situation would they be talking about? What alternative courses of action might have been open to them? Given their level of knowledge, what are the pros and cons of various courses of action?

Students might be asked, perhaps in groups, to pre-design the family's situation. What characteristics of the family would affect their options and how they regarded the pros and cons of the various options: Social class? Age and gender of various family members? Knowledge of the surrounding countryside and neighboring settlements? Whether any relatives, friends, or neighbors had died already? Measures being taken by the government, the Church, or people they know? The kind of advice they are getting and from whom?

Activity Four: Writing Diary Entries

Write a set of diary entries spanning several weeks as a literate citizen of a town hard hit by the plague in 1348 might have written them. Include descriptions, observations, concerns, and attitudes that would likely have been reflected in such a diary. (This activity may serve as an assessment.)

TRANSMISSION OF THE BLACK DEATH
1338–1349



Map adapted for this unit from Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 36-37.

EVERYONE FELT HE WAS DOOMED TO DIE

Historical Background

Boccaccio was the illegitimate son of a merchant family. Although poetry was his love from an early age, his father made him serve an apprenticeship in commerce. He studied law for a while, and traveled on business in Italy and France. He was not in Florence in 1348 when it suffered from the Black Death, though he described it in his masterpiece, the book called *The Decameron*. It is a book of stories in which seven young women and three young men of Florence leave the city for the hills. They were fleeing the plague, which according to Boccaccio killed upwards of 100,000 people during its height from March to July. In the stories the young people amuse themselves by taking turns telling tales. Many other authors later borrowed the plots of these tales. Although Boccaccio's vivid portrait of plague-infested Florence was not an eyewitness account, he certainly had plenty of opportunity to talk to those who were survivors of the epidemic.

In 1350, when he returned to Florence, he became a friend of the humanist man of letters Petrarch. The two of them became important figures in the early Renaissance. As a humanist, Boccaccio bought and copied many neglected manuscripts of classical literature and history. He also promoted the study of Greek so that the newly collected books in this language could be read in Italy. Acclaimed as an author, he traveled as a diplomat in the service of the Republic of Florence. Therefore, his ideas could be widely influential.

Florence was an inland city, but located on the navigable Arno River. At the time of the Black Death, its records show the city as having 100,000 inhabitants. It had 200 establishments producing high quality cloth, which, along with customs dues and income from banking services, enriched the republic. It was a center of arts and letters, with many fine buildings, pictures, and libraries. It was not immune, however, to famine, which struck in 1340, and to subsequent rioting of the poor against the wealthy and to civil war. Famine recurred in 1347. The following year, according to the reputable Florentine historian Villani, three-fifths of the city's population died of the Black Death. In fact, it later killed Villani himself.

This mortality, however, was not for lack of people trying to cope with the disaster. A committee of eight was formed and given near-dictatorial powers. They refused entrance to the walled city to any who were sick, enforced stringent regulations against garbage in the streets, forbade public gatherings at funerals, and arranged for the collection of corpses and their burial layered in trenches when graveyard space ran out. Their measures were unsuccessful and lapsed when not enough people were left to enforce them. For five months the plague continued to rage. Nevertheless, only three years later, Florence was able to

make war on the lord of Milan who tried to dominate the city. Soon after, Florence expelled bands of mercenaries that had invaded its territory.

Primary Source

Into the distinguished city of Florence, more noble than any other Italian city, there came the deadly pestilence. It started in the East, either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, and it killed an infinite number of people. Without pause it spread from one place and it stretched its miserable length over the West. And against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with this task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health. . . .

[I]t began in both men and women with certain swellings either in the groin or under the armpits, some of which grew to the size of a normal apple and others to the size of an egg (more or less), and the people called the *gavoccioli*. And from the two parts of the body already mentioned, within a brief space of time, the said deadly *gavoccioli* began to spread indiscriminately over every part of the body; and after this, the symptoms of the illness changed to black or livid spots appearing on the arms and thighs, and on every part of the body, some large ones and sometimes many little ones scattered all around. . . . Neither a doctor's advice nor the strength of medicine could do anything to cure this illness; on the contrary, either the nature of the illness was such that it afforded no cure, or else the doctors were so ignorant that they did not recognize its cause and, as a result, could not prescribe the proper remedy (in fact, the number of doctors, other than the well-trained, was increased by a large number of men and women who had never had any medical training); at any rate, few of the sick were ever cured, and almost all died after the third day of the appearance of the previously described symptoms (some sooner, others later), and most of them died without fever or any other side effects.

This pestilence was so powerful that it was communicated to the healthy by contact with the sick, the way a fire close to dry or oily things will set them aflame. And the evil of the plague went even further: not only did talking to or being around the sick bring infection and a common death, but also touching the clothes of the sick or anything touched or used by them seemed to communicate this very disease to the person involved. . . .

Everyone felt he was doomed to die and, as a result, abandoned his property, so that most of the houses had become common property, and

any stranger who came upon them used them as if he were their rightful owner. In addition to this bestial behavior, they always managed to avoid the sick as best they could. And in this great affliction and misery of our city the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick or so short of help that it was impossible for them to fulfill their duties; as a result, everyone was free to do as he pleased. . . . .

Thus, for the countless multitude of men and women who fell sick there remained no support except the charity of their friends (and these were few) or the avarice of servants, who worked for inflated salaries . . . And since the sick were abandoned by their neighbors, their parents, and their friends and there was a scarcity of servants, a practice that was almost unheard of before spread through the city: when a woman fell sick, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble she might be, she did not mind having a manservant (whoever he might be, no matter how young or old he was), and she had no shame whatsoever in revealing any part of her body to him—the way she would have done to a woman—when the necessity of her sickness required her to do so. This practice was, perhaps, in the days that followed the pestilence, the cause of looser morals in the women who survived the plague. . . .

Doctors at the bedside of a plague victim.
Hieronymus Brunshwig, Library of Congress

The plight of the lower class and, perhaps, a large part of the middle class, was . . . pathetic: most of them stayed in their homes or neighborhoods either because of their poverty or their hopes for remaining safe, and every day they fell sick by the thousands; and not having servants or attendants of any kind, they almost always died. Many ended their lives in the public streets, during the day or at night, while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of the decomposing bodies. The city was full of corpses . . .

In the scattered villages and in the fields the poor, miserable peasants and their families, without any medical assistance or aid of servants died on the roads and in their fields and in their homes, as many by day as by night, and they died not like men but more like wild animals. Because of this they, like the city dwellers, became careless in their ways and did not look after their possessions or their businesses; furthermore, when they saw that death was upon them, completely neglecting the future fruits of their past labors, their livestock, their property, they did their best to consume what they already had at hand. So, it came about that oxen, donkeys, sheep, pigs, chickens and even dogs, man's most faithful companion, were driven from their homes into the fields, where the wheat was left not only unharvested but also unreaped, and they were allowed to roam where they wished. . . .

Oh how many great palaces, beautiful homes, and noble dwellings, once filled with families, gentlemen, and ladies, were now emptied, down to the last servant! How many notable families, vast domains, and famous fortunes remained without legitimate heir! . . .

Reflecting upon so many miseries makes me very sad. . . .

Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, selected, translated and edited by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

I BURIED MY FIVE CHILDREN WITH MY OWN HANDS

Historical Background

Agnolo di Tura was a chronicler who lived in Siena, a city of about 60,000 located some thirty miles south of Florence. In 1347, it was a great banking center and wealthy enough to be building what the citizens intended to be the greatest church in Christendom. Siena was very hard hit by the Black Death. Di Tura, who survived it though all his family died, claimed that after the plague had passed, only 10,000 people remained alive. The records do not allow us to know exact figures, but certainly there is evidence that the city suffered unusually high losses. Construction work on the cathedral was halted and never resumed. Both the university and the wool-processing industry closed down. Laymen filled posts usually reserved for clergymen because so many priests died. Many estates, left with no heirs at all, were taken over by a much-reduced city council. The civil courts ceased to meet. When recovery set in, the authorities acted quickly to identify taxpayers that remained and to impose a new tax in

Photo by Jeanne Dunn

The Cathedral of Siena, Itlay

The tall wall with the arches on the left side of the illustration was to be the facade of a much more magnificent church. A great nave, or main longitudinal area of the church, was to extend from the facade back to the tower and dome. The Black Death, however, killed so many people in Siena in 1348 that the work came to a halt and was never resumed.

order to pay the much higher salaries that soldiers and government employees were demanding. This, however, led to poverty in the countryside, a wave of immigration to higher-paying jobs in the city, and increased tension between haves and have-nots, with an accompanying rise in crime and financial problems. Siena probably never fully recovered from the effects of the Black Death.

Primary Source

The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in their groin and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

Source: Quoted in Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 45.