

Understanding the Black Death Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

How did people in the 14th century understand the Black Death?

Materials:

- Understanding the Black Death PowerPoint
- Documents A-B
- Graphic Organizer
- Final Questions

Plan of Instruction:

- 1) Introduction: Use PowerPoint to establish background information on the bubonic plague of the 14th century.
 - a. Slide 2: The Black Death
 - *The bubonic plague decimated large populations around parts of the world between the 1330s and 1350s.*
 - *Although there is continued debate about the origins of the plague, many scientists and historians today believe the plague resulted from the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, which is common in fleas and carried by rodents.*
 - *Once the bacteria jumped to humans, it became highly contagious.*
 - *Symptoms of bubonic plague include: fever, gangrene, chills, cramps, seizures, and painful swelling of the lymph glands called buboes.*
 - *Most people who contracted the plague died within days.*
 - *At the time of the pandemic, it was called the “Great Pestilence,” the “Great Plague,” or the “Great Mortality.” The term the “Black Death” came into popularity among German- and English-speakers in the 19th century and continues to be used today.*
 - b. Slide 3: Spread of the Plague
 - *The plague likely originated in China in the 1330s.*
 - *It traveled west along trade routes both by land and sea in the 1340s.*
 - c. Slide 4: Human Costs
 - *The plague was a pandemic. It killed between 75 and 200 million people across three different continents.*
 - *Death rates included approximately one-third of the population in the Middle East and nearly one-half of the population in Europe.*
 - d. Slide 5: Understanding and Explaining the Plague
 - *People in the 14th century had little knowledge of how the plague originated, how it spread, or how to treat it.*
 - *Across the world, people struggled to make sense of the pandemic. To give just one example, flagellation, a religious*

practice of whipping oneself for penance, grew in popularity during the Black Death.

- e. Slide 6: Central Historical Question
 - *Today we are going to analyze and compare two different documents created during the Black Death to try and figure out: How did people in the 14th century understand the Black Death?*
 - 2) Pass out Document A and Graphic Organizer.
 - a. Explain purpose and directions for reading the document.
 - *To address the Central Historical Question*
 - *To analyze the document with historical reading questions*
 - b. Students read document and answer Guiding Questions.
 - c. Share out responses.
 - 3) Pass out Document B
 - a. Explain purpose and directions for reading the document.
 - *To address the Central Historical Question*
 - *To analyze the document with historical reading questions*
 - *To compare, or corroborate this document with Document A*
 - b. Students read document and answer Guiding Questions.
 - c. Share out responses and compare documents. Note the primary similarities and differences of these documents.
 - 4) Final Claims and Questions
 - a. Students write a response for the following question:
 - How do these documents illustrate how people made sense of the Black Death?
 - List 2-3 questions you still have about the Black Death and how people understood it.
 - What types of documents might you examine to try and answer these questions?
 - b. Share out responses.
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Citations

Document A

Justice Hecher, *Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, translated by B.G. Babington (London: George Woodfall and Sons, 1856), 50-53.

Document B

Ibn al-Wardi, "An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence," in *Near eastern numismatics, iconography, epigraphy, and history: Studies in honor of George C. Miles*, ed. Dickran Kouymjian, translated by Michael Dols (American University of Beirut, 1974) 447-454.