

Like Black Smoke : The Black Death's Journey

Magazine Article by Diana Childress

Name _____

Date _____

A World Turned Upside Down : How the Black Death Affected Europe

Magazine Article by Mary Morton Cowan

How do we fight Disease?

WARM-UP: Communities can do a lot to stay healthy and prevent disease. But people didn't always know what we know now. The articles you are about to read tell about a time during the Middle Ages when the bubonic plague affected so many people that it changed a society.

LIST IT : What can we do to encourage good health for ourselves and others? List five guidelines that people can follow to prevent diseases from spreading. Be ready to explain why you included each guideline.)



● **TEXT ANALYSIS : Cause-and-Effect Pattern of Organization**

Nonfiction writers often use patterns of organization to help explain ideas. One commonly used pattern is **cause-and-effect organization**, which shows the relationship between an event and its cause or effect. Cause-and-Effect Organization

- can answer the questions "What happened? and "Why did it happen?"
- uses signal words and phrases, such as *caused*, *because*, *led to*, *for this reason*, *as a result*, and *may be due to*

As you read these two articles, notice how the writers use cause-and-effect patterns to explain key points

● **READING STRATEGY : SET A PURPOSE FOR READING**

In this lesson, your purpose for reading is to compare articles that use cause-and-effect organization. As you read, use a chart to note which topics are covered by each article. You will be asked to do more with this chart after you finish reading.

▲ **VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT**

The following words help provide information about the bubonic plague. Use the ones you know in a sentence. Work with a partner to look up the meaning of the others, then write a sentence for each of those words.

Topics Covered	"Like Black Smoke"	"A World Turned Upside Down"
Agricultural changes		
How disease spread		
Loss of life		
Trade routes		
Worker shortages		

WORD LIST

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------|------------|
| artisan | cope | rampage |
| bacterium | disarray | recurrence |
| chronicle | hierarchy | |

Like Black Smoke

The Black Death's Journey

Diana Childress

"We see death coming into our midst like black smoke," wrote the poet Jean Gethin, when plague invaded Wales in March 1349. This "rootless phantom which has no mercy" was especially frightening for those who witnessed it because they knew it was somehow contagious, but no one could halt or explain its relentless spread across Europe.

Eastern Beginnings

The earliest evidence of the Black Death lies in a cemetery in what was once a prosperous town near Lake Issyk-Kul on the fabled Silk Road in Central Asia. An unusually large number of graves there are dated 1338 and 1339. Three headstones mentioning the cause of death provide a clue about why so many people died: the plague.

Did the Black Death originate near Issyk-Kul? No one knows for sure. Most medieval writers say that the plague began in the East. They name places like Cathay (China), India, and Turkey. Modern historians agree that the epidemic started in Asia—more specifically, somewhere on the central steppes or in the Himalayan lowlands on the border of India and China. In both regions, the plague **bacterium**, *Yersinia pestis*, has long thrived among wild marmots, ground squirrels, and gerbils.

On the Move

How did the disease travel from wild rodents to humans? According to early accounts, before the Black Death broke out, earthquakes, floods, and famines devastated Asia. One theory is that these disasters drove wild animals into villages and towns in search of food. Fleas then spread plague germs to rats...

When rats died of the plague, their fleas hunted for new hosts. Since rats nested in the adobe (sun-dried brick) walls and thatched roofs of medieval houses, the next meal for these fleas often came from people...

The disease spread more easily if an infected person's lungs started filling up with plague bacteria. Then, every cough and sneeze spewed germs into the air, spreading pneumonic plague directly to others.

If they are not among the lucky few who recover, people and rats soon die of the plague, but infected fleas can lurk in a rat's nest, barnyard manure, or bedding and clothing for many months without eating. A medieval writer was not far wrong when he wrote that "even the houses or clothes of the victims could kill."

...Cloth, grain, furs, and hides kept in rat-infested warehouses soon became delayed-action "plague-bombs" waiting to go off. An account tells how four soldiers learned the hard way about contaminated goods. Looting houses in a deserted town, they stole a fleece off a bed, and later slept under it. They were all dead by morning.

Commercial caravans, Mongol armies, and other wayfarers "carried" the Black Death in their baggage as they crisscrossed Asia. By 1345, it had traveled from Issyk-Kul to the major cities of the Golden Horde (a part of the Mongol Empire that is today south-west Russia).

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

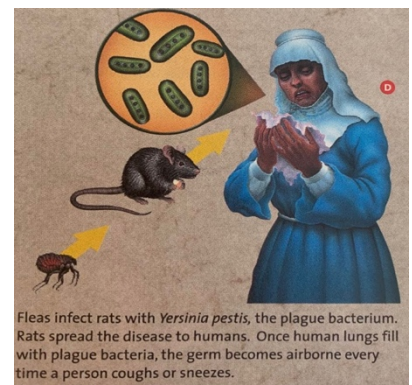
Read the title and scan the subheadings. What do you expect to learn from this article?

1) CAUSE AND EFFECT

The question in paragraph 4 introduces a cause-and-effect chain of events. What explanation does the author give for the plague's spread to villages and towns?

2) CAUSE-AND-EFFECT

Why did fleas move on from rats to humans for their next meal?



3) CAUSE-AND-EFFECT When a writer describes a relationship that has multiple causes, multiple events, or is a series of causes and effects, the explanation can become complicated. The author helps clarify a series of causes and effects by illustrating it. Use the illustration and caption to understand how people spread the disease. Once people have the plague bacterium, what happens when they cough or sneeze?

From Asia to the Mediterranean

At the time, Italian merchants from Genoa and Venice had established trading posts at Kaffa, a city on the Crimean Peninsula that juts out into the Black Sea. Since the mid-1200s, their galleys had transported Asian horses, furs, and slaves to Syria and Egypt and silks and spices to Italy. When plague began to spread to the Crimea, many of the Europeans tried to escape by sea, but the Black Death sailed with them.

The following summer, plague broke out in Constantinople. From there, it crossed the Mediterranean region. That fall, ships brought the plague to Alexandria, Egypt, one arriving with only 45 of its original crew of 332 men still alive. Another fleet came to Messina, Sicily, its crew so ill that a chronicle reports that the men had "sickness clinging to their very bones."

The epidemic reached Genoa on New Year's Eve 1347 aboard three galleys laden with spices from the East. On discovering that many seamen were sick, the Genoese chased the ships from the port with "burning arrows and engines of war." Plague-ridden rats, however, had already jumped ship. The galleys sailed off along the coast of France, still hoping to find a place to sell their deadly merchandise.

Following the Trade Routes

Following 14th-century trade routes, the Black Death swept across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. After it assaulted the seaports, smaller boats carried it to neighboring towns and to river ports far inland. It could not be stopped. Although some town refused entry to travelers from infected areas, and people learned to mistrust "plague goods," few noticed the dead rats, and no one thought of the fleas.



4) INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS

According to the map, in what direction did the Black Death first travel? Note how continents were affected.

5) CAUSE AND EFFECT

Why did the plague spread around the globe?

Reports of plague in 1348 show how the circles of infection widened. In the east, it hit Cyprus, Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem, and even pilgrims visiting Mecca. From Genoa and Venice it crept down the Italian boot toward Florence and Rome. Going west, it struck Marseilles, Tunis, and Barcelona. By June, the epidemic was storming Paris, causing the French royal family to flee. That summer, it overran Germany, Poland, and Hungary and crossed the channel to southern England.

Winter did not slow its progress. The weather was unusually mild and wet, perhaps warm enough for fleas living on house rats to remain active. Huddled indoors, people were also exposed to air contaminated both by those suffering from pneumonic plague and by the dust from rodent droppings.

As the disease moved northward through England, citizens of Lincoln wrote wills at 30 times the normal annual rate. At first, the Scots avoided the plague, but when they assembled troops to invade England, pestilence struck, perhaps imported by soldiers from France.

The Black Death landed in Scandinavia on a ship carrying wool from London to Norway. The ship had run aground near Bergen because all the crew had died. From there, the plague spread across Norway, into Sweden, and across the Baltic Sea to Russia.

6) CAUSE AND EFFECT

What conditions might have caused the plague to spread in winter?

The Journey Ends

In 1350, plague peaked in Scotland and Scandinavia, while in southern Spain, it killed King Alfonso XI of Castile. The following year, it stretched to Greenland, where it helped wipe out the Norwegian colony, and to Yemen, at the tip of the Arabian peninsula. In 1353, it closed in on Moscow, killing both the patriarch of the Russian church and the grand duke of Muscovy.

Finally, the Black Death petered out somewhere in Kiev, having come almost full circle back to Kaffa. During its long rampage, between one-third and one-half of the population of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East died. No natural disaster before or since has caused such devastation of human life over such a large area. It was one of the greatest catastrophes in human history.

7) SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION


What socio-economic classes did the plague affect? How do you know?

 8) **SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** How did boats spread the disease?

 9) **SUMMARIZE** how the plague spread from rodents to people.

 10) **CAUSE AND EFFECT** During the rampage of the plague, why did people believe that “even the houses or clothes of the victims could kill”?

11) **EVALUATE EVENTS** Create a timeline of the key events that contributed to the spread of the Black Death. Which event do you think was most critical? Support your choice with details from the article.

 12) **ANALYZE AUTHOR'S PURPOSE** What do you think the main points Childress wants readers to learn from this article? Explain your reasoning.

13) **EXPLORE PERSONIFICATION :**

Here, “proud words” are given human qualities.

Look out how you use proud words.

When you let proud words go, it is not easy to call them back.

They wear long boots, hard boots; they walk off proud; they can't hear you calling –

Look out how you use proud words.

– “Primer Lesson” by Carl Sandburg

Personification is a description of an object, an animal, a place, or an idea as if it were human or has qualities or abilities that people have.

A) What is being compared in the poem?

_____ compared to _____

B) The author uses vivid verbs to personify the Black Death in the article. What vivid verbs does the author use? How do they impact our understanding of the article?

A World Turned Upside Down : How the Black Death Affected Europe

Mary Morton Cowan



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 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.

- 1) **SUMMARIZE** : Create a Comparison Matrix to organize the changes identified in paragraphs 1-7.

Factor	Before Plague	After Plague
nobles		
peasants		
economy		
population		
food		
cities		

2) ANALYZE VISUALS

What are the individuals in the image doing?

3) SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Read the first paragraph. Paraphrase the main idea that the article will explore.

4) CAUSE AND EFFECT

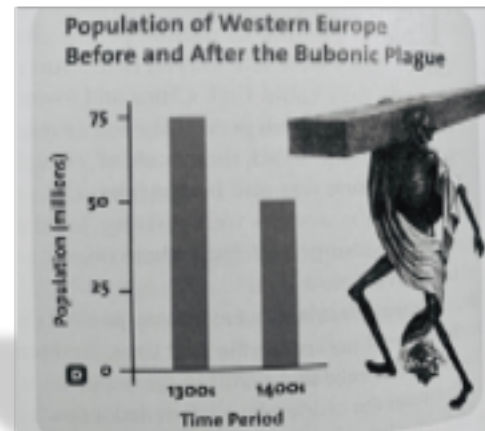
Reread paragraph 5. What effects of the Black Death does the author describe?

5) CAUSE AND EFFECT

Reread paragraph 8. What clue words help you recognize the pattern of organization?

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.



7) **RECALL** How long did it take for the bubonic plague to wipe out one-third of Europe's population?

6) **INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS**
What was the population of Western Europe in the early 1300s?

8) **RECALL** Why did the depopulation of Europe encourage technological developments?

9) **SUMMARIZE** What was life like in Europe in the Middle Ages before the Black Death swept through?

10) **CAUSE AND EFFECT** Why did food prices drop after the Black Death swept through?

COMPARING ARTICLES

11) **SET A PURPOSE FOR READING** Review your completed chart. Which topics were emphasized in each article? Which article do you think provided the most effective discussion concerning the spread of the disease? Support your opinion with details from the texts.

(Add to lesson plan). **INDEPENDENT READING** : Students may enjoy reading David Getz's *Purple Death : The Mysterious Flu of 1918*, an accessible account of the 1918 influenza epidemic.