

# THE BLACK DEATH IN FLORENCE

## CENTRAL HISTORICAL QUESTION

- ❓ How did the Black Death affect Florence, Italy?

## MATERIALS

- 📄 Student Handout - Evaluating Evidence
- 📄 Student Handout - Florentine Chronicle
- 📄 Assessment - Black Death in Florence
- 📄 Answer Key - Black Death in Florence

## COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

- ☰ Page 61 - #1 (Gr. 6-12), #2 (Gr. 6-8), #4 (Gr. 6-10), #5 (Gr. 6-8), #6 (Gr. 6-12), #7 (Gr. 11-12), #8 (Gr. 6-12), #9 (Gr. 6-12), and #10 (Gr. 6-8)

## PLAN OF INSTRUCTION

- 1 Teacher provides excerpt from a classroom textbook that describes the Black Death and discusses its consequences. Read the excerpt with the class.

Discuss with students:

- (a) What was the Black Death?
- (b) How did it affect Europe?
- (c) If you wanted to know what happened in a particular city, what type of evidence would you need to consult?

- 2 Distribute Evaluating Evidence handout. Have students complete in pairs.

- 3 Review student answers.

Suggested responses to student answers:

Questions/Answers:

- (a) **Question:** A 2011 Hollywood movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a young monk in Florence in 1348.

**Answer: (N)** Students might say that they have seen many realistic historical movies and have learned a lot about history from them. It's important to emphasize the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in this context. Although the producers of these movies may strive for historical accuracy, they are under no obligation to achieve it.

- (b) **Question:** Church records from Florence that list how many people died in 1348.

**Answer: (Y)** *Such records, though they might be missing important data, would be reliable sources on the Black Death in Florence.*

- (c) **Question:** A history book written in 2008 by a historian who studied medical records in Florence from 1340-1360.

**Answer: (Y)** *This source could be reliable but might not have the specific information on 1348.*

- (d) **Question:** A memoir written in 1398 by someone who lived in Florence in 1348, but who was 10 years old at the time.

**Answer: (N)** *This source would be problematic at best. A ten-year-old would have a limited understanding of what was happening. He or she might have some powerful memories of people dying, but given that the memoir was written 50 years later, it should be read cautiously.*

- (e) **Question:** A fictional account of a young woman who survived the Black Death in Florence, written by an Italian man in 1360.

**Answer: (N)** *This source might capture some of the historical context, but it cannot be regarded as a reliable source because it's fiction.*

#### 4 Distribute “The Florentine Chronicle” handout.

Have students complete individually. Remind students to read the source note first, and to ask themselves whether or not Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti’s account is reliable.

#### 5 Discuss student answers.

Students may express frustration at the notion that all sources can be considered unreliable in one way or another. This might be a great opportunity to discuss the skill of corroboration—if several sources say the same thing, we can make a stronger case about what happened in the past. For example, di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti was not the only person who wrote about the Black Death; we could corroborate his claims with other sources to figure out what parts are true. It might be helpful to have students consider how a lawyer builds a case in court from (unreliable) witness testimony.

---

#### REFERENCES

- di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti, M. (n.d.). *Florentine chronicle* (J. Usher, Trans.). (Original work published ca. 1370-1380). Retrieved from [http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian\\_Studies/dweb/plague/perspectives/marchionne.php](http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/plague/perspectives/marchionne.php)
- Boccaccio, G. (1921). *The decameron* (J. M. Rigg, Trans.). London: David Campbell. (Original work published ca. 1353). Retrieved from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/boccacio2.asp>

# THE BLACK DEATH - EVALUATING EVIDENCE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## DIRECTIONS

Please answer the following questions.

-----

The Black Death occurred in the 14th century and peaked between 1347 and 1350. It spread from Asia throughout Europe and the Mediterranean and killed anywhere from 30-60% of Europe's population.

Suppose you wanted to find out how the Black Death affected just one city in Europe: Florence, Italy. Consider each of the pieces of evidence listed below. In the line provided, write **Y** if you think the source could provide reliable information on the Black Death in Florence, and **N** if you think it cannot provide reliable information. Below each source explain your answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ A 2011 Hollywood movie starring Leonardo DiCaprio as a young monk in Florence in 1348.

\_\_\_\_\_ Church records from Florence that list how many people died in 1348.

\_\_\_\_\_ A history book written in 2008 by a historian who studied medical records in Florence from 1340-1360.

\_\_\_\_\_ A memoir written in 1398 by someone who lived in Florence during the Black Death, but who was 10 years old in 1348.

\_\_\_\_\_ A fictional account of a young woman who survived the Black Death in Florence, written by an Italian man in 1360.

# THE FLORENTINE CHRONICLE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## DIRECTIONS

Please read the passage below and answer the following questions.

“[The Black Death] was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house, as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another. Those in town fled to villages. Physicians could not be found because they had died like the others. And those who could be found wanted **vast** sums in hand before they entered the house. And when they did enter, they checked the pulse with face turned away. . . . Child abandoned the father, husband the wife, wife the husband, one brother the other, one sister the other. In all the city there was nothing to do but to carry the dead to a burial.”

*Source: Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti was born in Florence in 1336 and lived there most his life. He wrote the Florentine Chronicle in the late 1370s and early 1380s.*

## GLOSSARY

**vast**  
large

## QUESTIONS

- (1) When was the Black Death? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (2) When did di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti write the *Florentine Chronicle*? \_\_\_\_\_.
- (3) What is one reason historians might believe di Coppo di Stefani Buonaiuti's account of the Black Death?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- (3) What is one reason historians might *not* believe di Coppo di Stefani Buonaiuti's account of the Black Death?
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

# ASSESSMENT - BLACK DEATH IN FLORENCE

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## DIRECTIONS

Please read the passage below and answer the following questions.

Description of the Black Death in Florence, Italy, in 1348:

“The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being **strewn** about the open street, two hogs came and . . . took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro . . . almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags.”

*Source: The passage above comes from The Decameron by Boccaccio. Although Boccaccio was alive in 1348 and witnessed the Black Death, he was not in Florence at the time, and The Decameron is a work of fiction.*

## GLOSSARY

**strewn**  
scattered

## QUESTIONS

(1) Did Boccaccio witness the Black Death?

- (a) Yes
- (b) No

(2) What is one reason why Boccaccio's account of the Black Death is believable?

---

---

(3) What is the difference between fiction and nonfiction?

---

---

(4) Boccaccio's account of the Black Death is fictional. Why does this make it less believable?

---

---

## ASSESSMENT 2 - BLACK DEATH IN FLORENCE (ANSWER KEY)

### COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

Page 61 - #4 (Gr. 6-8), #6 (Gr. 6-8), and #8 (Gr. 6-10).

### DIRECTIONS

Please read the passage below and answer the following questions.

Description of the Black Death in Florence, Italy, in 1348:

“The rags of a poor man who had died of the disease being **strewn** about the open street, two hogs came and . . . took the rags between their teeth and tossed them to and fro . . . almost immediately, they gave a few turns, and fell down dead, as if by poison, upon the rags.”

*Source: The passage above comes from The Decameron by Boccaccio. Although Boccaccio was alive in 1348 and witnessed the Black Death, he was not in Florence at the time, and The Decameron is a work of fiction.*

### GLOSSARY

**strewn**  
scattered

### QUESTIONS

(1) Did Boccaccio witness the Black Death?

- ☒ (a) Yes
- (b) No

(2) What is one reason why Boccaccio’s account of the Black Death is believable?

He witnessed the Black Death.

(3) What is the difference between fiction and nonfiction?

Strong answers will explain that non-fiction writing attempts to tell what really happened. With fiction, there isn’t the same expectation that the author will attempt to accurately recount the past.

(4) Boccaccio’s account of the Black Death is fictional. Why does this make it less believable?

Strong responses will explain that fictional accounts can be made up. Moreover, they will note that we don’t know which parts of *The Decameron* Boccaccio made up and which parts were based on his experiences during the Black Death. As a result, *The Decameron* may not be a strong piece of evidence for understanding what happened in Florence during the Black Death.