

## Understanding the Black Death Lesson Plan

### Central Historical Question:

*How did people in the 14<sup>th</sup> century understand the Black Death?*

#### Materials:

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

#### Plan of Instruction:

- 1) Introduction: Use PowerPoint to establish background information on the bubonic plague of the 14<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Document A: University of Paris Medical Report (Modified)

*The passage below is an excerpt from “The Report of the Paris Medical Faculty,” issued in October 1348. In the report, medical faculty at the University of Paris describe what they believed were the origins of the bubonic plague and provide advice on how to avoid contracting the plague.*

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We, the Members of the College of Physicians of Paris, . . . intend to make known the causes of this plague.

We declare as follows: It is known that in India, and the area of the Great Sea, the constellations which combated the rays of the sun . . . **exerted** their power especially against the sea, . . . and the waters of the ocean arose in the form of vapor. The waters were in some parts so corrupted that the fish died. This vapor spread itself through the air in many places on earth. . . . On all the islands and adjoining countries to which the corrupted sea-wind extends, . . . if the inhabitants of those parts do not take the following advice we announce to them inevitable death—except if the grace of Christ preserve their lives.

Every one of you should protect himself from the air; **wormwood** and chamomile should be burnt in great quantity in the market places and in the houses. . . . Cold, moist, watery food is in general harmful. Going out at night, and even until three o'clock in the morning, is dangerous on account of the dew. . . . Fasting is injurious and so is anxiety of mind, anger, and **immoderate** drinking and bathing. . . . Everyone should remember this, but especially those who reside on the coast, or upon an island into which the poisonous wind has penetrated.

**Source:** *The Report of the Paris Medical Faculty, October 1348.*

### Vocabulary

exert: apply force

wormwood: a fragrant plant

immoderate: excessive

## Document B: Ibn al-Wardi (Modified)

*The passage below is an excerpt from Ibn al-Wardi's "An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence." Ibn al-Wardi was an Arab writer, philosopher, and historian who was alive in the Middle East during the plague. Here, he describes the effects of the plague on the city of Aleppo in Syria. In 1349, al-Wardi died from the plague.*

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The plague began in the land of darkness. China was not preserved from it. The plague infected the Indians in India, the Sind, the Persians, and the Crimea. The plague destroyed mankind in Cairo. It stilled all movement in Alexandria.

Then, the plague turned to Upper Egypt. The plague attacked Gaza, trapped Sidon, and Beirut. Next, it directed its shooting arrows to Damascus. There the plague sat like a lion on a throne and swayed with power, killing daily one thousand or more and destroying the population.

Oh God, it is acting by Your command. Lift this from us. It happens where You wish; keep the plague from us.

The plague caused the people of Aleppo the same disturbance. Oh, if you could see the nobles of Aleppo studying their books of medicine. They follow its remedies by eating dried and sour foods. The buboes which disturb men's lives are smeared with Armenian clay. Each man treated their health to make life more comfortable. They perfumed their homes with **camphor**, flowers, and **sandal**. They wore ruby rings and put onions, vinegar, and sardines together with the daily meal.

We ask God's forgiveness for our bad souls; the plague is surely part of His punishment. Some said: the air's corruption kills. I said: the love of corruption kills.

**Source:** *Ibn al-Wardi, "An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence," 1348.*

### Vocabulary

camphor: a fragrant wax

sandal: a fragrant wood

## How did people in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century understand the Black Death?

### Sourcing and Contextualization

#### Doc A: *Paris Medical Faculty*

#### Doc B: *Ibn al-Wardi*

1. Who wrote this document?		
2. When and where was this document written?		
3. Why was this document written?		
4. Do you think people in 1348 trusted and believed these authors?		

### Close Reading and Corroboration

#### Doc A: *Paris Medical Faculty*

#### Doc B: *Ibn al-Wardi*

5. Where did the plague originate?		
6. What or who caused the plague?		

<b>7. Doc A: What <i>should</i> people have done to try to prevent or cure the plague?</b>	<b>Doc B: How <i>did</i> people try to prevent or cure the plague?</b>

### Final Questions

- 1) How do these documents illustrate how people understood the “Black Death”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) List 2-3 questions you still have about the “Black Death” or how people understood it?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) What types of documents might you examine to try and answer these questions?

## How did People in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century understand the Black Death?

Instructors Notes: Possible Responses

### Sourcing and Contextualization

	Doc A: Paris Medical Faculty	Doc B: Ibn al-Wardi
<b>1. Who wrote this document?</b>	Paris Medical Faculty	Ibn al-Wardi
<b>2. When and where was this document written?</b>	Paris, France 1348	Aleppo, Syria 1348
<b>3. Why was this document written?</b>	Presumably, to inform the public about the origins of the plague and to advise people on how to avoid contracting it.	Unclear. Presumably to record the events of 1348 for history and let people know about the effects of the plague.
<b>4. Do you think people in 1348 trusted and believed these authors?</b>	Very likely. Though, people may have been skeptical or doubtful of universities, given the power of Catholic Church in Europe at this time.	Unclear. This depends on knowing more about how well regarded or widely read al-Wardi was at the time.  He does not have a medical background, but he focuses primarily on how the plague spread and how people reacted to it in these passages.  This account seems reliable given al-Wardi's purpose.

## Close Reading and Corroboration Questions

Doc A: <i>Paris Medical Faculty</i>		Doc B: <i>Ibn al-Wardi</i>
5. Where did the plague originate?	India	Unclear. Al-Wardi refers to the “land of darkness.” This reference could be literal or figurative.
6. What or who caused the plague?	Something in the atmosphere affected the sun’s rays, which polluted the ocean, killed fish, and created a vapor that carried the plague to humans.	Does not give a complete answer. But, he notes that the plague is acting under God’s command. And, in the final paragraph he notes that the plague “is surely” part of God’s punishment for human corruption.
7. Doc A: What <u>should</u> people have done to try to prevent or cure the plague?		Doc B: How <u>did</u> people try to prevent or cure the plague?
<p>People <i>should</i> have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• protected themselves from bad air by burning wormwood and chamomile</li> <li>• avoided cold, moist food</li> <li>• stayed in at night to avoid the dew</li> <li>• avoided fasting, excessive amounts of alcohol, and stress</li> </ul>		<p>People <i>were</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading medical books for advice</li> <li>• eating dried fruit and sour foods</li> <li>• rubbing clay on buboes</li> <li>• trying to make their lives as comfortable as possible</li> <li>• using various items to keep the air in their home fresh</li> <li>• wearing rings and eating onions, vinegar, and sardines</li> </ul>