

History Files

CONFIDENTIAL

FILE: Crisis in the
14th Century

History Files Case No. 001

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Dear Agent,

A new case has crossed my desk. We are investigating the reason why the Middle Ages ended. You now have access to all the evidence. On the next few pages you will find the list of suspects and all the evidence. I am counting on you to crack the case, detective. Get sleuthing

History Files Director

Mrs. Daily

Possible Suspects!



The Great Famine



Hundred Years' War



The Black Death

Exhibit A

More farming, more people, more pro!

After two centuries of prosperity, Europeans faced disaster. From 1315 to 1317, it rained so much throughout Europe that crops were ruined. From England to Italy to Russia, major crop failure became a huge problem. It was a period marked by disease, crime, and death. Remember that warming period in Europe that allowed Vikings to travel beyond Scandinavia? Well, that ended in 1300 and from that point on Europe saw some of the worst weather of the entire Middle Ages. Severe winter weather was only made worse by a rainy spring and a cold summer.

During the Great Famine years, straw and hay could not be cured and there was little food for livestock. Food prices began to rise as more and more crops failed. Salt, the only preservative of the time, was hard to come by as it was difficult to make in the wet weather. The increased size of the population did little to help the situation. Many went hungry as they could no longer afford the inflated prices. In some areas of Europe, prices rose over 300%! Draft animals were slaughtered to be used as food as more of the population starved. While peasants (who consisted of about 95% of the population) were affected the most, nobles suffered, too.

In the summer of 1317, the regular weather patterns returned. The problem was that many survivors were ill with diseases and the original seed stock had been used up that Europe did not fully recover until the 1320s.

The Great Famine had many consequences. The first, was that crime rates rose across Europe. This would not mean a return to feudalism, but more a new type of warfare would emerge, one in which chivalry was done away with. This also meant that medieval governments were unable to deal with the situation and help the people.

All that population growth? Gone. The Great Famine put an end to that. This would also leave a weakened population to deal with future problems.

Witness Report: Ida Klein

Professor of History, Oxford University

Arrows in Flight, Guns of Might

Exhibit B

It has been long since I last wrote. I am trying to wrap my mind around this war. Has it really been more than one hundred years? My great-grandfather was just a boy when Edward III claimed the throne of France. Sure his mother had been the King of France's sister and the king had left no heir. Ole' Edward was the rightful heir. But had England known we would fight from 1337 until this past year, 1453, I do not know if we would have followed him into the fight

My grandfather and father had been bowmen during the war, fighting with the longbow. What a weapon! It pierced the French armor as if it was not even there. But it was the new weapons that made the difference. The ones I fought with, guns and canons. The strongest castles were no match for the canon as it ripped a part walls meant to protect. Long gone were the feudal ways of fighting with armored knights and thick castle walls. No, a new way of fighting was born. The chivalry of my fathers was dead and a new violence took hold of Europe.

We were sure of our victory. The English would win. Who could have foreseen a little peasant girl, of just seventeen, would inspire the entire French army. Joan of Arc they called her. She had said voices from heaven had told her to dress in men's clothing and fight with the French. And fight she did, helping the French win several key battles. We captured her and burned her at the stake. Oh why did we do such a thing! It only made her a martyr for the French to rally behind! I blame her for our loss. The French would win the war and here I lay, mortally wounded, telling my story before the angels of heaven take me home.

Artifact: Journal Entry of English soldier, unknown

RingaroundtheRosey

Exhibit C

Introduction

Beginning in 1347, Europe was struck by a horrid epidemic, the bubonic plague (also known as the Black Death). It earned the name Black Death because bleeding under the skin left black spots all over the body. All levels of society were affected by the disease which killed most its victims within a few days. At the time, no one knew what was causing the disease.

...and almost nobody survived beyond the fourth day, neither doctors nor medicine proving of any avail, and there appeared to be no remedy, either because those illnesses were not yet recognized, or because doctors had never previously had cause to study them properly.

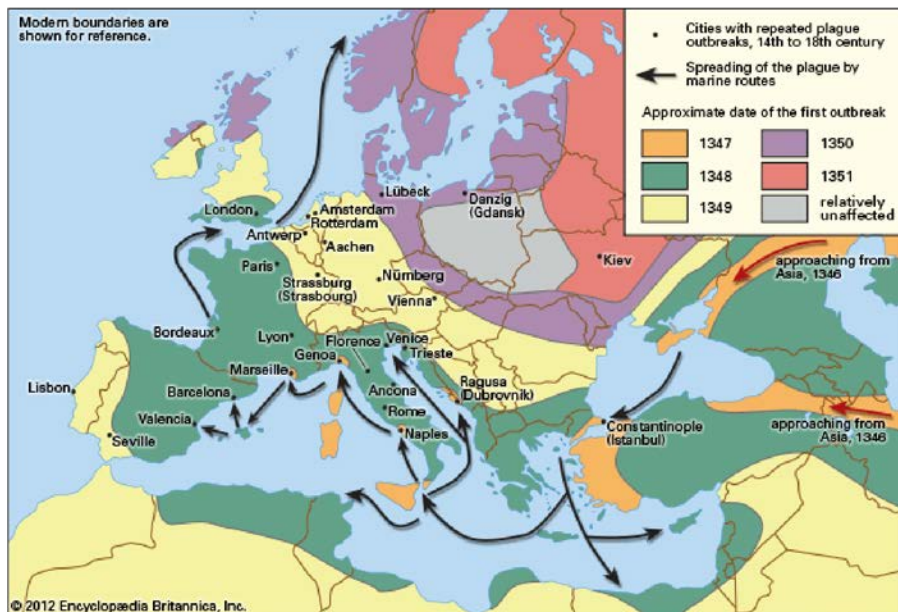
-Marchionne di Coppo di Stefano Buonaiuti,

Florentine Chronicle

Today it is known that the bubonic plague is carried by fleas on rats.

The Spread of the Black Death

The epidemic began in central Asia and spread along trade networks from China. People infected by the disease traveled on merchant ships that made their way to Europe. From European ports, it moved along trade routes and up rivers to the heart Europe.



First Italy, then Spain and France, then England. Every part of Europe was affected. There was no escape. Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague in Florence, Italy. He wrote:

The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was...pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in the hopes of safety, and fell sick by the thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets...many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because neighbors smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner.

-Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

Jews and the Black Death

Terrified Europeans looked to find an answer to the devastation. When that could not be found one, they looked for scapegoats (people who are blamed for a problem they did not cause). That scapegoat became the Jews of Europe. Some Christians, without any evidence, claimed that Jews poisoned wells, spreading the disease. In parts of Europe, Jews were exiled or killed. The pope issued an order to leave Jews unharmed, but this was largely ignored.

Effects of the Plague

As many as a third of all Europeans died between 1347 and 1352 before the plague ran its course. That's about 25 million people. Peasants, merchants, priests, scholars, nobles were all affected. People became obsessed with death and disease. There were no longer enough people to cultivate the land and grow crops. Vast portions of Europe, that had once been farmland, were now overgrown with brush. Because so many peasants had died, manor lords were desperate for workers. Serfs and peasants who had survived now could demand wages for their work. Serfs could no longer be tied to the land, as there was not enough knights to protect the land. Serfs left to go where wages were highest even as nobles tried to pass laws to limit their movement.

Peasants across Europe revolted. The Peasant's Revolt of 1381 saw an uprising of serfs. They killed local lords and burned manors. Eventually the revolt was put down, but the traditional ties between lord and serf were broken.

In the old medieval world, everyone knew their place in society. From birth to death a person's social class was fixed. After the Black Death, people were no longer tied together in the same way they had before. Individualism became a common theme in society. Feudalism was truly gone.

Artifact: Current World History Textbook