

What did people think caused the Black Death?

Discover : what Medieval people thought caused the plague **Explore** : the mindset of Medieval people **Skills** : source evaluation.



What did people at the time think caused the Black Death?

The people living in the Middle Ages had very little idea about the real cause of the Black Death. People were very religious and superstitious. There was very little understanding of the real causes of illnesses and doctors tried some very unusual way to prevent or cure the illness. Below are four things they believed caused the Black Death.

1 : Jewish People

**2 : Dirty Conditions
or Polluted Air.
(Miasma Theory)**

**3 : A Punishment
From God**

4 : Lepers

“ This plague, it is said, began among the unbelievers who came to Italy, and then crossing the Alps . Then it spread to France, through and Spain, little by little, from town to town, from village to village, from house to house, and finally from person to person. It even crossed over to Germany, though it was not so bad there as with us. However suddenly men died, almost all awaited death joyfully. “

Jean de Venette's chronicle from the plague years
(1359)

A



B

The Flagellants were a very extreme religious Catholic group of the Middle Ages. They showed their religious beliefs by whipping (hitting) themselves in public in a display of penance. By doing this they believed they could gain God's forgiveness for their own and other people's sins. This was most popular during times of crisis. Despite condemnation (criticism) from the Catholic Church, the movement gained strength and reached its greatest popularity during the Black Death.

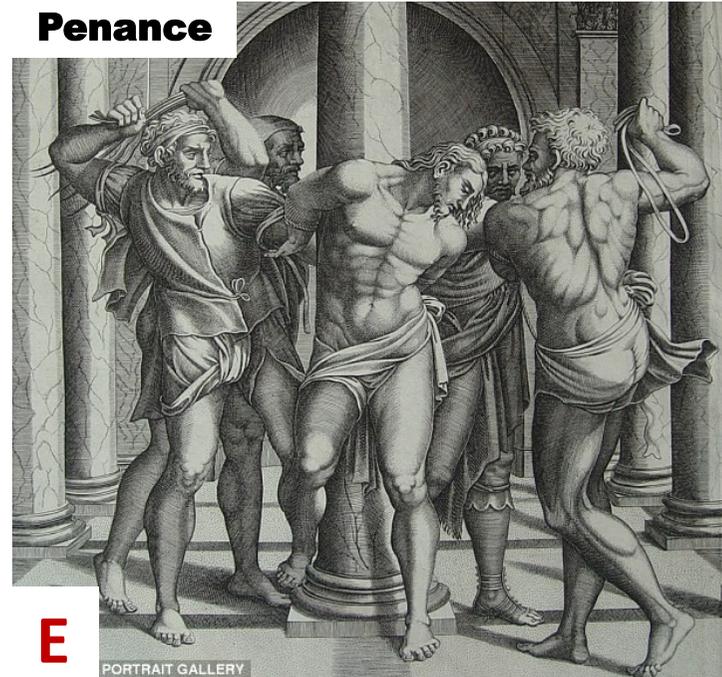
www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (edited)

C



D

Penance



E

" At the time of the Black Death many explanations were given as to what caused it. Some explanations were based on religion and the result of ___1___ behaviour. Another explanation was based on astronomy - the movements of the ___2___ and planets and their positions in the sky. Others said the disease was the result of bad ___3___ ."

Schoolshistory.com

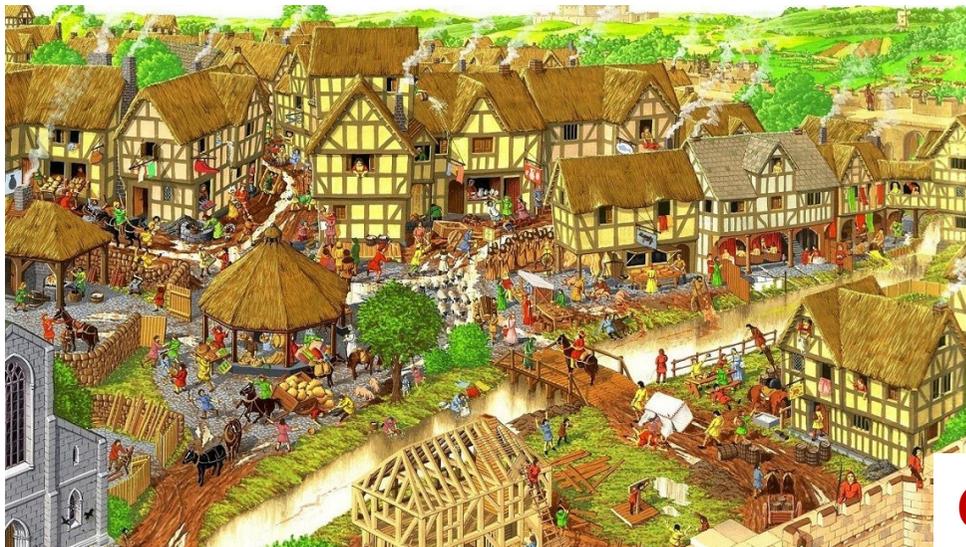
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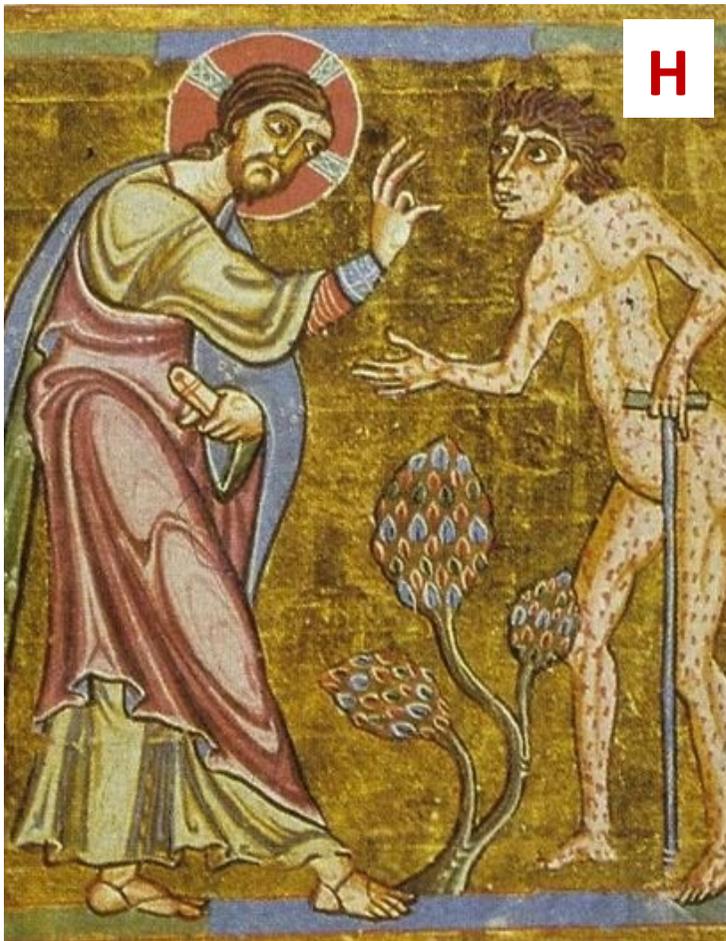
F

Towns were dirty places to live in. Many people threw toilet waste into the street along with other rubbish. The streets often had open sewers running down the middle of them. These sewers became clogged with rubbish and excrement (poo) thrown from the windows. Pigs, dogs and rats often roamed through the streets. Towns such as London sometimes tried to clean up the streets, but not very often. Towns might use pigs to eat what rubbish there was. The water was not clean as a river would have been polluted with toilet waste thrown into it from villages both upstream and downstream. Therefore, as people would have used this as a source of water (they had no other choice) and because people knew little about health and hygiene. Life expectancy could be short. Life for a poor person in a town or city was described as "nasty, brutal and short" .

Sources from [John D Clare.Net](http://JohnDClare.Net) and Historylearningsite.com

G



**H**

The Christian population in Medieval Europe was already used to deep anti-Jewish rhetoric (talk) that they heard this from their priests, and easily decided that the Jews were to blame for the Black Death. They already accused Jews of poisoning wells and of ritual murder. Because of these Christians everywhere in Europe went on a murderous rampage against the Jews, burning them alive wherever they found them. In August 1349, the Jewish communities of Mainz and Cologne were cruelly wiped out. In February of that same year, the citizens of Strasbourg murdered 2,000 innocent Jews. By 1351, 60 major and 150 smaller Jewish communities had been totally destroyed.

J

Decaying bodies were suspected of spreading plague known as the “Black Death,” which killed about one-third of Europe’s population in the 1300s. The bodies of plague victims were buried in mass graves or tossed into the Rhone River, causing an overpowering stench. Peasants believed that disease from dead bodies spread through the air, so they covered their mouths with handkerchiefs dipped in aromatic oil whenever they ventured outside. Herbs were burned in an attempt to filter the air, and magic spells were cast for added protection. www.classroom.synonym.com/

K

The Black Plague, which wiped out perhaps a third of the population of Europe, demanded an explanation, and doctors of the time responded as well as it could. The most popular conjectures about the pestilence were variations on the miasmatic theory of disease, an idea that went back at least to the ancient Greeks — that disease was essentially bad air. "Miasma" was the Greek word for pollution. Another theory held that a series of earthquakes in Europe had released corrupt air from the middle of the earth. A third had the plague wafting in on noxious winds from the equator.

Birthstory.net

L**M****N**

Some diseases were believed to spread through human contact. For example, leprosy sufferers were required to wear long tunics, gloves and footwear to avoid infecting others, according to an article in "The Social Science Journal." People with leprosy were forbidden to speak unless they were downwind. Lepers were banned from bathing in rivers. Leprosy sufferers entering a public place were expected to announce their presence by ringing a bell because they were considered highly contagious.

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O

"Bands of hooded men, wearing white robes marked front and back with a r_____ cross, are moving to across Europe, trying to stop the Black D_____ by whipping themselves . **The Flagellant Brahren**, as they are known, believe that the plague is a punishment for human s____. They move in groups of 50 to 500 from town to town, Singing hymns and sobbing, the men b_____ themselves with studded iron spikes. Blood gushes from their many wounds, and the spikes embed themselves in the torn f_____. The ritual is performed in public t_____ each day." **MiddleAges.net.**

Q



P

Smell was also a sense that could be used against the leper. In a time before soap and disinfectants, the odour of the leper had a powerful effect on the healthy. Even before fear of miasmatic contamination of the Black Death the leper stench of their decomposition was associated with evil and sin. Jews were also said to smell of a reeking odour, the smell of hell and purgatory. Disease was thought to be carried on contaminated air, and sisters of the hospitals were instructed to purify the place of miasmas.

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R



An Uncovered Plague Pit



Sanitation in the Middle Ages, from an old wood cut

T