



The Black Death

TEACHERS NOTES

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Timemap can be used in two different ways:

- 1) as a whole-class presentation, using a whiteboard or projector, or
- 2) as a student-centred learning tool for individual or small group work.

What does this Timemap of contain?

This Timemap is made up of a sequence of maps showing the vast spread of the Black Death. This appalling tragedy is mostly seen by pupils as it affected England, but these maps offer a chance for teachers to raise their pupils' gaze above the narrow confines of English, or even European, history, and take a look at the wider world.

The maps show the disease spreading out across Europe and Asia. It should be noted that, although the disease is well-documented in Europe, this is not so true in other parts of the world. Large-scale plagues were recorded in India and China in the 1340s, but they had no idea that Europe and the Middle East were suffering the same fate. These outbreaks were almost certainly linked to the spread of the same disease which we know as the Black Death, but what is less certain is where the pandemic originated. The maps assume central Asia, but other points of origin have been suggested (as is referenced in the information hotspots). The state of the evidence does not allow certainty.

The purpose of the Timemap is to give pupils an overall understanding of the Black Death:

- in what period of history did this episode occur, and what was the historical setting?
- Where, why and how quickly did it spread?
- What impact did it have on different societies?

The maps have a considerable amount of information linked to them - more than is offered in most text books. This information is accessed by clicking on the "i" button, just below the date, and then clicking the hotspots which appear in the maps.

Also just below the date is a "Q". This button accesses one or more simple questions about that map. These questions are designed to encourage students to study the maps for the information they contain.

The Timemap is accompanied by these teachers' notes, which contain suggestions for using the resource with students (see below). These suggestions are also set out in a student's worksheet.

2. USE WITH STUDENTS

The Timemap can be used in one of two ways.

With the whole class

If a teacher wishes to acquaint students briefly with the topic before moving on to another topic in world history, then this Timemap is ideal. It makes a superb whiteboard resource, and can be used as a whole-class presentation. It offers an effective, visual overview of the history of the Black Death, and will give students a grasp of key events and developments.

As a student-based resource

This Timemap can be used as the main resource for a learning unit on the history of the Black Death lasting several lessons. It has a large amount of information embedded in it - more than students will find in most text books - and is designed to be used by students, as individuals or in small groups, independently of the teacher.

The information is accessed by clicking on the "i" button, just below the date, and then clicking the hotspots which appear in the maps.

Also just below the date is a button labelled "Q". This button accesses one or more simple questions about the map - questions designed to get students looking at the information in the maps in a focussed way.

If your intention is to introduce your students to the history of the Black Death, then get them to work through the questions on the maps, either individually or in small groups.

These questions are ideal for bolstering students' knowledge about the topic.

If, however, you want students to look at the topic more deeply and more thoughtfully, then a series of suggested activities are set out below, section 3, and in the worksheet. These activities are designed to enhance students' historical understanding of such issues as chronology, change and continuity, causation, and interpretation.

If you do not have time for your students to tackle all these activities, choose one or more which are most appropriate to your students' abilities.

3. SUGGESTED STUDENT ACTIVITIES

The following activities are also set out in a Students' Worksheet, which accompanies these notes.

Activity 1: Sequence of events

This simple exercise is designed to develop students' sense of chronology.

List in chronological order the sequence of events, and draw the route, that brought the plague from Central Asia to Scotland.

If these particular events had not taken place, might the plague not have spread to Scotland? Give reasons.

Activity 2: Why did the Plague spread so far?

This exercise looks at the issue of causation.

What determined where the plague spread, and where it didn't?

Any scientist will tell you that the spread of a disease such as the Bubonic Plague is caused by the passing of a virus from one organism to another.

For historians things are not quite so simple. List the reasons for the spread of the Black Death over such a large part of the world.

Which is right - the scientist's explanation, or the historian's?

What does this tell us about the different kinds of knowledge sought by the two scholars? Which, do you think, is the more valid?

Do you think that the historian's explanations have anything to say about the modern world and its challenges?

Activity 3: Impact

The effect events have on history are often complex; they can be broadly categorized into short-term and long-term effects. Some of the latter can be very long-term indeed - some historians argue that the roots of Europe's industrial revolution lay in the depopulation and shortage of labour that arose from the Black Death.

Either this exercise may be done, or exercise 4, below.

List some of the reactions to the coming of the plague within European society.

How did the Black Death change the history of different regions (China? The Indian Sub-continent? Europe?)

In which regions did the pandemic have the most immediate impact?

In which region did it have the longest lasting impact?

What was the most important way in which the Black Death changed world history, do you think?

Activity 4: A great tragedy, but of little significance?

This exercise may be done as an alternative to 3, above.

No great kingdom or empire came to an end as a direct result of the Black Death. After the wave of plague had passed by, people recovered from the shock and got on with their lives much as before.

Does this mean that the Black Death was a tragedy which had little significance for the history of the world?

Activity 5: Source work

This exercise is a brief look at historical sources. It aims to give students an awareness of what are "primary" sources and what are "secondary" sources.

Textbooks and encyclopedias are what historians call "secondary sources" (as is this Timemap); that is to say, they were not written at the time, but are based, directly or indirectly, on information that was left by those who lived at or near the time (either in writing or by some other means, which archaeologists can dig up and interpret). Embedded in the information contained in these maps, however, are extracts from several "primary sources".

Find these and list them.

How much value do these sources have in contributing to our understanding of the Black Death?

What did contemporaries think were the causes of the plague?

APPENDIX A: OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Timemap are to develop the following knowledge and skills in students:

Knowledge

The information about the Black Death contained in this Timemap can provide:

- A "Big Picture" overview of the topic
- A more detailed look at specific events and episodes in the spread of the Black Death
- Key features of the period, including a look at the world in which the plague spread, and the short- and long-term impact of the plague on contemporary societies
- A focus on various strands (see below *)
- The impact of geography upon history, in particular the way the plague deeply affected some parts of the world and not others
- The presence of global connections, apparent in the fact that the Black Death spread to many corners of the Eastern Hemisphere along already existing links between the different civilizations.

*The strands of history encountered in this Timemap are:

social & economic trends: the deep, long-term impact the plague had on European society and economy in particular

government: the effect the plague had on the rise and fall of different kingdoms and empires in the Eastern Hemisphere

thought and religion: the ideas which contemporaries had about the plague, and its causes, and the reaction of church and state to the plague in Europe

Skills

- The Timemaps will give students a clear grasp of the Chronology of the Black Death
- The Causation - causes and consequences - of the spread of the Black Death are emphasised in the map-based information, and are highlighted in the activities linked to the maps
- The use of contemporary sources gives opportunities for students to become acquainted with primary sources and think about the different Interpretations placed on events and developments by medieval commentators and modern historians.

APPENDIX B: Commentary of Maps

The commentary notes are for use by teachers wishing to use the Timemap as a presentation to their class. The notes give background details to each map in the sequence.

If you just wish to give a brief overview of the Black Death, the first paragraph (in bold) for each date will give you a summary of the information.

1346: The World of 1346

Asia and Europe are home to several civilizations, all tracing their roots back several thousand years.

In the Far East, China was the most advanced civilization in the world, a land of many huge cities, highly educated bureaucrats, wealthy business houses, printed books, paper money, great sea-going ships navigated with the aid of compasses, and armies equipped with firearms. By contrast, the countries of Europe were backward and barbaric, their cities tiny, literacy greatly restricted and their technology primitive.

1346: Trade routes

The international trade routes between eastern and western Asia, and into Europe and North Africa, had never been so busy as they were at this time.

Many of the greatest trade routes, above all the Silk Road across central Asia, came under the protection of Mongol rulers who ensured that merchants and travellers were safe from robbers, and that there were frequent inns, or “caravanseries”, where they could stay. In Europe, Italian merchants dominated the Mediterranean trade whilst the Hanseatic League ruled the Baltic and North Sea trade.

1346: Origins of the Disease

The Black Death was an outbreak of the bubonic plague, which originated somewhere in Asia. Exactly where it originated is not known. However, by the mid-1340s the western steppe region of central Asia had been infected.

The name “Black Death” is one given by modern scholars to a pandemic which killed millions of people in the mid-fourteenth century. At the time it was given such names as the “Great Mortality” or simply the “Plague”.

1347: The Disease spreads

The disease travelled along the trade routes of the time, which linked all the old world civilizations so that none was spared.

The disease was spread particularly effectively by rat populations. Rats had colonized not only towns and cities, but also ships, which became long-distance carriers of the disease.

1348: The Disease spreads

By the end of the second year of the epidemic the Black Death had reached all the major regions of the Old World.

1349: The Disease spreads

The plague had a huge impact on all the regions it infected, changing the course of each major region's history in a decisive manner.

1350: The Disease spreads

By the end of the fourth year of the pandemic the disease had reached the outer borders of all the great civilizations.

1351: The Black Death dies out

Scholars believe that wherever it went the Black Death killed around a third of the population, some thirty million people in all. This makes it the worst natural disaster ever to hit the human race (in recorded history).

In the following three centuries the disease returned regularly, although only on a localised basis. This was enough to prevent the populations of Europe and Asia returning to pre-plague levels for two centuries. The last outbreak of the plague in England was the Great Plague of London in 1665.