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Episode #129

The Black Death

2nd Feb, 2021

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Black Death, the most deadly pandemic in human history.

[00:00:31] After its arrival on European [shores](#)¹ in 1347 it killed anywhere from 30 to 60% of the population of Europe, and it's estimated that it was responsible for reducing the world's population by almost half a billion people.

[00:00:51] We'll start by talking about how The Black Death started, what happened to you if you got ill, how people tried to cure it, and what happened to society as a result of The Black Death.

¹ where the land meets a large body of water (e.g. lake, sea)



The Black Death

[00:01:04] We'll also talk about how it ended, and finish by asking ourselves whether we need to be worried about The Black Death coming back to [wreak²](#) a similar amount of destruction today.

[00:01:16] It is quite the story, so without further ado, let's get cracking.

[00:01:22] Our story starts in Messina, a port city on Sicily's northeastern coast, just opposite the mainland.

[00:01:31] In October of 1347, 12 ships pulled into the harbour.

[00:01:36] This wasn't anything [abnormal³](#); it was a port, and ships pulled in all the time.

[00:01:43] But these ships weren't like all the other ships.

[00:01:47] They had returned from the Black Sea, and the [crew⁴ onboard⁵](#), the sailors [onboard](#), were covered in horrible black [boils⁶](#), terrible black [lumps⁷](#) on their skin, with blood and liquid coming out of them.

² causes

³ not normal

⁴ the group of people who work together, e.g. on a ship

⁵ on a ship

⁶ a painful, infected bump under the skin

⁷ a swollen area sticking out from your skin



The Black Death

[00:02:03] As the ships neared the harbour, the **bystanders**⁸, the people watching the arrival of the ships, could see that most of the sailors on board were dead, their bodies **piled up**⁹ on the ship.

[00:02:19] The sailors that were alive were welcomed **ashore**¹⁰, so that they could get medical assistance.

[00:02:25] But within a week most had died, and residents of Messina had started to show exactly the same **symptoms**¹¹ as the sailors who were dropping dead.

[00:02:37] This deadly disease had started to **rage**¹² through Messina.

[00:02:42] It then **spread**¹³ throughout Italy, France, and within a couple of years it had made its way to almost every corner of Europe.

[00:02:52] The disease is now referred to as The Black Death, or The Plague, and scientists have a pretty good idea of what it is, how it's **transmitted**¹⁴, and how to stop it.

⁸ people standing nearby and watching (something happen)

⁹ placed on top of one another

¹⁰ onto land

¹¹ something that shows you are suffering from an illness

¹² continues at great speed

¹³ move quickly

¹⁴ passed from one place or person to another



The Black Death

[00:03:05] But when it first emerged, nobody had any idea.

[00:03:10] Europeans had heard stories about a great plague that existed in the east, but had never experienced it in real life.

[00:03:20] Sure, there had been smaller plagues, almost since the [dawn¹⁵](#) of written history, but The Black Death was the first to be not just so [widespread¹⁶](#), but also so deadly.

[00:03:34] It all started, so scientists now believe, in central Asia, and was likely carried by the Mongol army.

[00:03:43] We know, or at least believe, this through an account from an Italian [notary¹⁷](#), a man named Gabriel de' Mussi.

[00:03:52] Between the years of 1345 and 1346 the Mongols had surrounded a trading city called Kaffa, in the Crimea.

[00:04:02] The Mongol army had [unintentionally¹⁸](#) I should add brought rats with them, which we now know carried the disease.

¹⁵ start

¹⁶ existing in many places at the same time

¹⁷ someone with legal power to sign documents, often a lawyer

¹⁸ not done on purpose



The Black Death

[00:04:11] The disease had started to **spread** through the Mongol army, and bodies had started to **pile up**¹⁹ outside the city of Kaffa.

[00:04:21] The disease didn't just **miraculously**²⁰ appear in the Mongol army outside Kaffa - it's believed to have existed in the rats that followed the army for quite some time.

[00:04:33] But given the fact that the Mongol army was almost always on the move, when someone got the disease and died, their body would just be left, so there was limited opportunity for the disease to **spread**²¹.

[00:04:48] Not in Kaffa.

[00:04:50] Outside the city of Kaffa, the Mongol army was **static**, it was in the same place for some time, meaning that the disease was much more easily **transmitted** from one person to another.

[00:05:04] As the bodies **piled up**, the Mongol soldiers threw them over the city walls, infecting the local population and **poisoning**²² the water.

¹⁹ placed on top of one another

²⁰ in a surprising way

²¹ staying in one place

²² infecting



The Black Death

[00:05:15] The disease **spread** throughout the city of Kaffa, infecting everyone who came into contact with it.

[00:05:22] It was clear that whatever it was, it was deadly, and it was **spreading**²³ quickly through the population.

[00:05:31] Merchants who were in Kaffa and in the surrounding area **fled**²⁴ for their lives.

[00:05:37] Among these were the Italian merchants that headed back on the 12 ships to Messina, but for them, it was too late.

[00:05:47] They returned to Sicily with The Black Death, carrying the plague, and it's from these 12 ships that it's believed that it **spread** to the rest of Europe.

[00:05:59] This isn't to say that if these ships hadn't landed in Messina, history would be very different.

[00:06:06] It's now accepted that, yes, they might have been the first, but if it wasn't these 12 ships it would have been another 12 ships, or it would have come from somewhere else other than Kaffa.

²³ moving fast from one place to another

²⁴ ran away



The Black Death

[00:06:19] So we shouldn't **overstate**²⁵ the importance of these **putrid**²⁶, disgusting dead bodies arriving over the walls and being probably the first recorded **instance**²⁷ of biological warfare.

[00:06:32] In any case, this was one of the first documented **instances** of The Black Death, a plague that was to **decimate**²⁸, in fact, more than **decimate** if we're talking technically, the European population over the following 50 years.

[00:06:50] After its arrival in Messina, it **spread** through Sicily, Genoa, Venice, and Northern Italy.

[00:06:57] It then arrived in France, Spain, Portugal, and by June 1348, just 9 months later, it had arrived on the **shores** of Britain, via a sailor who arrived in Weymouth, a port in south west England.

[00:07:15] Within a few months it was everywhere in Britain, and had also **spread** to other northern European countries, including Germany, Poland, Norway and Sweden.

[00:07:26] At the same time as it was moving north, it was also **spreading** in the other direction, and large areas of the middle East and North Africa suffered greatly.

²⁵ say is more important than it is

²⁶ dead and having a terrible smell

²⁷ time that something happened

²⁸ kill in large numbers (technically kill one in ten)



The Black Death

[00:07:38] By the summer of 1348 Cairo, in Egypt, was hit hard, with half of the city's 600,000 residents dead, and bodies **piled up** in the river Nile.

[00:07:52] It was brought to the city of Mecca by **pilgrims**²⁹ in 1348, and had also **spread** throughout large parts of modern Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and of course Turkey.

[00:08:05] It was everywhere.

[00:08:07] You might be thinking, 'well, that doesn't sound that quick, COVID-19 took a **fraction**³⁰ of the time.'

[00:08:14] Or you might be thinking '**hang on**³¹, there was basically no international travel 650 years ago, how did it manage to **spread** so fast?'

[00:08:24] The reality is that there was a lot more international travel 650 years ago than most people think there was, but it was through sailors, through merchant ships, just like the 12 ships returning to Messina from the Crimea.

[00:08:41] Europe and the middle east were actually very well connected, and these sea routes were full of merchants going all over the continent, buying goods from one place and sailing them to another to sell them for a profit.

²⁹ people who make a journey for religious reasons

³⁰ small amount

³¹ wait a minute



The Black Death

[00:08:58] And it was the sailors, and the merchant ships that were mainly responsible for taking the disease from one place to another.

[00:09:07] When you look at the [spread](#), it goes from port town to port town - on land it [spreads](#)³² much more slowly, because people simply didn't travel as far on land as they did by sea.

[00:09:22] In terms of the actual Black Death itself, it's believed to have consisted of three different types of plague: The Bubonic Plague, the Pneumonic Plague, and the Septicaemic Plague.

[00:09:37] Now, this is the part where you probably don't want to be eating your lunch, because there are going to be some slightly [unpleasant](#)³³ descriptions of what these diseases actually did to you.

[00:09:49] All of these three diseases, the three plagues, are caused by a [bacterium](#)³⁴ called the Yersinia Pestis.

[00:09:58] It is carried by rats, and most believe it to be transferred from rat to human, and then human to human, through [fleas](#)³⁵.

³² moves fast

³³ not enjoyable

³⁴ a very small living thing, singular of bacteria

³⁵ small jumping insects



The Black Death

[00:10:09] The rat has the bacteria that causes the plague.

[00:10:12] A [flea](#)³⁶ bites the rat, sucks up the infected blood, then bites a human and passes them the disease.

[00:10:21] The first plague, the Bubonic plague, was the most common one.

[00:10:27] Symptoms of the bubonic plague would normally include a fever, [nausea](#)³⁷, and vomiting.

[00:10:34] You would also typically start developing horrible [boils](#), nasty [lumps](#) in your [groin](#)³⁸, your neck, and your [armpits](#)³⁹. Some were quite small, others could grow to as large as an apple.

[00:10:52] When it first started, it affected everyone equally - men and women, young and old.

[00:10:58] Victims usually died anywhere from 2 to 7 days after the first infection, and 80% of people who got the bubonic plague died.

³⁶ a small jumping insect

³⁷ feeling that you are going to vomit

³⁸ the place where your legs meet your body

³⁹ the place under where your arms meet your body



The Black Death

[00:11:11] The pneumonic plague worked in a similar way, but instead of creating these [lumps](#), it caused problems breathing, and was even more deadly, killing between 90 and 95% of its victims.

[00:11:28] And even more deadly than both of these was the Septicaemic plague, which infected the blood, and killed almost 100% of its victims.

[00:11:39] Luckily it was the rarest of the three, it was the least common of the three plagues.

[00:11:45] Although we now have a pretty good idea about what these different plagues were, when they first arrived doctors had absolutely no idea whatsoever - from what was causing the plague to how they could cure it, they [scratched their heads](#)⁴⁰ but nothing worked.

[00:12:04] Indeed, given the fact that there didn't seem to be a cure for it, and nobody could understand what was causing it, it was believed by many to be an act of God, a [punishment](#)⁴¹ for some great wrong that had been committed.

[00:12:21] In Europe, people looked for [scapegoats](#)⁴², people to blame.

⁴⁰ if you scratch your head, you don't know what to do about something

⁴¹ suffering caused as revenge for something done

⁴² people who are said to be responsible for something bad



The Black Death

[00:12:26] God was always right, and everything happened for a reason, so if there was this great plague that was [sweeping](#)⁴³ the continent and killing millions, someone must be to blame for it.

[00:12:39] Was it all of society to blame, had things moved in the wrong direction and this was God's way of showing his displeasure, of showing how unhappy he was?

[00:12:51] Or was it to punish a particular group, or groups, in society—groups that were doing wrong against God?

[00:13:01] Several groups [bore the brunt](#)⁴⁴ of the blame, either because people thought they carried the plague, or because people thought God was unhappy with them and that was why he had sent the plague.

[00:13:15] These groups included the poor, [Roma](#)⁴⁵, [lepers](#)⁴⁶, and Jewish people.

[00:13:21] Frequently people from these groups were killed or thrown out of cities, as it was believed that doing so would reduce the [spread](#) of the plague.

⁴³ moving fast through

⁴⁴ if you bear the brunt of something, you suffer the most from it

⁴⁵ a people originally from India, who move from place to place

⁴⁶ someone who has leprosy (a serious disease of the skin)



The Black Death

[00:13:32] This kind of activity was actually **perpetuated**⁴⁷ and **encouraged**⁴⁸ by the nobility and the richest in society, it wasn't some kind of **bottom up**⁴⁹ movement.

[00:13:44] Indeed, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles IV, actually **pardoned**⁵⁰ people who had killed Jews.

[00:13:53] Now, evidently this is **despicable**⁵¹, **inexcusable**⁵² behaviour, but one thing this tells us is that people were **resorting to**⁵³ mad violence because they had absolutely no idea what was actually going on, and how to stop the **spread**.

[00:14:12] Another effect of this complete lack of knowledge, and belief that it was some great act of God was that there was a huge increase in people doing things to try to ask for forgiveness from God.

⁴⁷ allowed to continue existing

⁴⁸ persuade (to do something)

⁴⁹ from the lower part of society, rather than being imposed from the top

⁵⁰ forgiven for a crime

⁵¹ very unpleasant and bad

⁵² too bad to be forgiven

⁵³ doing something you don't want to do because there are no other better options



The Black Death

[00:14:26] This would range from even more frequent praying right through to [flagellation](#)⁵⁴, people [whipping](#)⁵⁵ themselves, [whipping](#) their naked backs to punish themselves in the hope that God wouldn't punish them by giving them the plague.

[00:14:42] And what were doctors doing throughout all of this, you might be asking?

[00:14:47] Doctors did try to cure it, but with [unsophisticated](#)⁵⁶ and ineffective techniques such as cutting open [veins](#)⁵⁷ to allow so-called 'bad blood' to come out, or even cutting the [boils](#), the large [lumps](#).

[00:15:03] They'd also try more spiritual cures, such as burning herbs.

[00:15:08] But nothing worked.

[00:15:11] Cities were especially badly hit by the plague, firstly because of the population density, but also because they were typically pretty dirty and [unsanitary](#)⁵⁸ places.

⁵⁴ hitting yourself with a whip (long piece of rope), often as a religious punishment

⁵⁵ hitting yourself with a whip (long piece of rope), often as a religious punishment

⁵⁶ not clever or cultured

⁵⁷ the tube that carries blood to the heart

⁵⁸ not healthy, not clean



The Black Death

[00:15:23] Animals lived together with humans, **rubbish**⁵⁹ was **piled up**, and it was an ideal environment for the disease to **spread**.

[00:15:33] People fled the cities to the countryside to try to escape the disease, but many took the disease with them, infecting people in the towns and villages, as well as cows, sheep and pigs, which could all carry the disease, and then it could be passed back to humans via fleas.

[00:15:54] The disease went almost everywhere, **wiping out**⁶⁰ entire families and communities.

[00:16:00] Of course, the effect of 30% of the population being **wiped out**⁶¹ was considerable.

[00:16:08] Firstly, if people think that they are very likely to die soon, they act in a different way.

[00:16:15] **Instances** of theft and criminality increased, people started committing more crime.

⁵⁹ food and goods that are no longer needed and are thrown away

⁶⁰ destroying

⁶¹ destroyed



The Black Death

[00:16:22] There are also records of women in England **adopting**⁶² more **revealing**⁶³ types of clothes, clothes that showed off more parts of their body, which would have been considered **immodest**⁶⁴ years before.

[00:16:36] **Presumably**⁶⁵ in both of these cases people were thinking, well, if I'm going to die soon, I may as well take some risks and do things I'm not normally allowed to do...

[00:16:48] From an artistic and cultural point of view, European art became very **morbid**⁶⁶, understandably, as death was so present in everyone's lives.

[00:17:00] And on an economic level, with fewer workers to do things like work the fields and produce food, prices **skyrocketed**⁶⁷, they increased dramatically.

[00:17:12] Cities emptied, and entire families were destroyed.

[00:17:16] With such a huge hit to the population, many economies almost **ground to a halt**⁶⁸, and it took years for them to recover.

⁶² starting to do or use something

⁶³ if clothes are revealing, they show more of your body than usual

⁶⁴ showing large amounts of your body

⁶⁵ used to suggest that you believe what you have said is true

⁶⁶ relating to death

⁶⁷ rose quickly

⁶⁸ stopped completely



The Black Death

[00:17:27] But, somewhat miraculously, within around 4 years of The Black Death first arriving in Europe, the deaths had started to slow, and people were not dying in nearly as high numbers as they had previously.

[00:17:43] The plague was still around, it hadn't completely disappeared, but there were several developments that we now believe helped stop its [spread](#), some of which might be quite familiar to us today.

[00:17:57] Firstly, there were improvements in personal hygiene. If you are cleaner, if there are fewer [fleas](#) around, and fewer places for the plague to exist, then it [spreads](#) more slowly.

[00:18:11] Secondly, as people realised that the disease was [contagious](#)⁶⁹, people arriving in cities were forced to quarantine. Indeed, the word quarantine, as you may know, comes from the Italian quarantina, referring to the 40 day period that a sailor would have to 'quarantine' before being allowed to come [ashore](#).

[00:18:35] Thirdly, with just far fewer bodies to exist on, there was less opportunity for the plague to [spread](#).

[00:18:43] Especially cities were incredibly [cramped](#)⁷⁰, small rooms were packed with people, and if these people died, and there were people [spread](#) out in the countryside, well that meant fewer bodies, fewer homes for the disease.

⁶⁹ easily spread, easily passed from one person to another

⁷⁰ not having enough space



The Black Death

[00:19:00] And related to this was the practice of [cremating](#)⁷¹, of burning bodies after a victim died.

[00:19:07] Previously, bodies had been [piled up](#) and buried, which evidently led to huge, [infectious](#)⁷² [piles](#)⁷³ of bodies.

[00:19:17] When people started to [cremate](#)⁷⁴ the dead, these dangerous [piles](#) of [infectious](#) bodies were no longer an [issue](#)⁷⁵.

[00:19:25] So, at different times in different countries across Europe and the middle east, but starting in around 1351, the numbers of people dying slowed, and the worst of the plague was over.

[00:19:40] There were continued [outbreaks](#)⁷⁶ of the plague for the next couple of centuries, and indeed The Black Death, or at least the Bubonic plague has never really completely gone away.

⁷¹ burying (of dead bodies)

⁷² containing a disease/infection that can be passed to another person

⁷³ group of things that are placed on top of each other

⁷⁴ burn

⁷⁵ problem

⁷⁶ the time when something (bad) begins



The Black Death

[00:19:54] Every year there are between one and two thousand cases of what's called human plague being reported, in countries such as Zambia, Madagascar, India, Algeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[00:20:09] In July 2020 you may have seen a slightly [sensationalist](#)⁷⁷ headline about a case of a man in a city in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia who caught The Bubonic Plague, and later a teenager dying from the plague in the same city.

[00:20:27] But, unlike in 1347 we now have an excellent idea about what The Black Death is, how to stop it from [spreading](#), and how to cure it.

[00:20:39] So whenever there is an [outbreak](#)⁷⁸, and to stress, these [outbreaks](#) have always tended to be very small, the health authorities do a pretty good job at stopping it before it can get out of hand.

[00:20:53] If one is to look for any positive consequences of The Black Death, historians point to an increased sense of European unity, and a sense of shared human experience that brought people closer together.

[00:21:08] We have all gone through this together, it has affected young and old, men and women, rich and poor.

⁷⁷ presenting a story in an exaggerated way

⁷⁸ the time when something (bad) begins



The Black Death

[00:21:16] One can only hope that more recent events, although they are thankfully significantly less deadly, might have a similar effect.

[00:21:26] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The Black Death, the most deadly pandemic in human history.

[00:21:35] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new, and if you were eating your breakfast, I hope that it didn't put you off too much.

[00:21:45] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:21:48] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:21:57] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:22:03] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Shores	where the land meets a large body of water (e.g. lake, sea)
Wreak	causes
Abnormal	not normal
Crew	the group of people who work together, e.g. on a ship
Onboard	on a ship
Boils	a painful, infected bump under the skin
Lumps	a swollen area sticking out from your skin
Bystanders	people standing nearby and watching (something happen)
Piled up	placed on top of one another
Ashore	onto land
Symptoms	something that shows you are suffering from an illness
Rage	continues at great speed
Spread	move quickly



The Black Death

Transmitted	passed from one place or person to another
Dawn	start
Widespread	existing in many places at the same time
Notary	someone with legal power to sign documents, often a lawyer
Unintentionally	not done on purpose
Pile up	placed on top of one another
Miraculously	in a surprising way
Static	staying in one place
Poisoning	infecting
Spreading	moving fast from one place to another
Fled	ran away
Overstate	say is more important than it is
Putrid	dead and having a terrible smell
Instance	time that something happened
Instances	times that something happened



The Black Death

Decimate	kill in large numbers (technically kill one in ten)
Pilgrims	people who make a journey for religious reasons
Fraction	small amount
Hang on	wait a minute
Spreads	moves fast
Unpleasant	not enjoyable
Bacterium	a very small living thing, singular of bacteria
Fleas	small jumping insects
Flea	a small jumping insect
Nausea	feeling that you are going to vomit
Groin	the place where your legs meet your body
Armpits	the place under where your arms meet your body
Scratched their heads	if you scratch your head, you don't know what to do about something
Punishment	suffering caused as revenge for something done
Scapegoats	people who are said to be responsible for something bad



The Black Death

Sweeping	moving fast through
Bore the brunt	if you bear the brunt of something, you suffer the most from it
Roma	a people originally from India, who move from place to place
Lepers	someone who has leprosy (a serious disease of the skin)
Perpetuated	allowed to continue existing
Encouraged	persuade (to do something)
Bottom up	from the lower part of society, rather than being imposed from the top
Pardoned	forgiven for a crime
Despicable	very unpleasant and bad
Inexcusable	too bad to be forgiven
Resorting to	doing something you don't want to do because there are no other better options
Flagellation	hitting yourself with a whip (long piece of rope), often as a religious punishment
Whipping	hitting yourself with a whip (long piece of rope), often as a religious punishment



The Black Death

Unsophisticated	not clever or cultured
Veins	the tube that carries blood to the heart
Unsanitary	not healthy, not clean
Rubbish	food and goods that are no longer needed and are thrown away
Wiping out	destroying
Wiped out	destroyed
Adopting	starting to do or use something
Revealing	if clothes are revealing, they show more of your body than usual
Immodest	showing large amounts of your body
Presumably	used to suggest that you believe what you have said is true
Morbid	relating to death
Skyrocketed	rose quickly
Ground to a halt	stopped completely
Contagious	easily spread, easily passed from one person to another
Cramped	not having enough space



The Black Death

Cremating	buring (of dead bodies)
Infectious	containing a disease/infection that can be passed to another person
Piles	group of things that are placed on top of each other
Cremate	burn
Issue	problem
Outbreaks	the time when something (bad) begins
Sensationalist	presenting a story in an exaggerated way
Outbreak	the time when something (bad) begins

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

