The Crusades

During the early Middle Ages, the religion of Islam experienced a period of growth. Between 622 and 750, Islam spread from the Middle East to North Africa and parts of Asia. As Islam thrived, Europeans worried about the threat it posed to Christianity.

The main reason for the Crusades was the Muslim occupation of the Holy Land in the Middle East, which included the city of Jerusalem and surrounding regions. Pope Urban II wanted to reclaim the land for Christians. In 1096 he ordered people to join military campaigns to free the Holy Land. These campaigns were called the Crusades.

People joined the Crusades for different reasons. Some wanted to show their devotion to God or have their sins forgiven. Others wanted to gain power. Many sought treasure in foreign lands. The Crusades weren’t clear-cut wars of Christians against Muslims. The first crusaders began by slaughtering Jews in the Rhineland, which is now part of Germany. In the Middle East, crusaders went on to kill Jews, Muslims, and even other Christians. As the battles progressed, Jews and Muslims sometimes united to defend themselves against the Christian crusaders.

Effects of the Crusades

After Muslims retook Jerusalem in 1292, Europeans lost interest in the crusaders’ cause. Many people had died, and kings had little money left to fund the Crusades. Although the Crusades were a military failure, they were an economic success. The crusaders returned to Europe with Arabian goods and ideas. They were able to reopen trade with the East. At that time, Arabian culture was far ahead of European culture, especially in the areas of science, medicine, and math. Here are some Arabian inventions and discoveries:

- the magnifying glass
- the pendulum, which measures time
- numerals and a decimal system
- algebra
- the existence of the immune system

These ideas contributed to the beginning of the Renaissance period in Europe.

The Magna Carta

King John took the English throne in 1199. He was an unpopular king who increased taxes to fund his wars. He also imprisoned people who opposed him without a trial.

A group of major landowners called barons rebelled against King John in 1215. These low-ranking nobles created a list of reforms that would protect them from the king’s unfair practices. This list became known as the Magna Carta, which is Latin for “great charter.” The barons seized the city of London and forced the king to sign the document on June 15, 1215.

The Magna Carta limited the king’s power. The king couldn’t impose taxes without the barons’ consent. The Magna Carta also established several new rules related to the legal system.
First, it declared that no “free man” could be arrested unless he was charged with a crime under the law. The king couldn’t arrest people simply because he disliked them or wanted to seize their property.

Second, once arrested, every prisoner was entitled to a trial. No one could be left in prison indefinitely. If a prisoner wasn’t tried and convicted, the prisoner would have to be released.

Finally, prisoners were entitled to a trial by a jury of their peers, or people of their social class. Judges could no longer act alone to convict and sentence a prisoner.

The Roots of Democracy

The Magna Carta didn’t create democracy. Ordinary people had no say in the taxes that the king levied. Only the barons had that power. Nor did most people have the right to a trial. That right was granted only to “free men,” or members of the upper class.

But the Magna Carta was a major step toward democracy. The ideas of limited government and trial by jury later became important elements of the US Constitution.

The Black Death

The bubonic plague, also known as the Black Death, occurred in western Europe between 1347 and 1351. During medieval times, people didn’t understand how such diseases spread. As a result, they couldn’t prevent them from spreading. Some historians believe that the plague killed more than one-third of Europe’s population.

The plague had both short-term and long-term effects. In this section, we’ll examine how the plague affected European culture and civilization. The Black Death was an epidemic, or a widespread outbreak of an infectious disease within a particular area in a short period of time. Epidemics were common in Europe. There were also epidemics of the plague during Roman times. But the Black Death was different and more terrifying than previous epidemics:

- The death rate was extremely high. It’s estimated that between one-half and two-thirds of victims died.
- It appeared to be highly contagious, meaning it spread quickly from one person to another.
- The disease progressed rapidly from onset of symptoms to death.
- The Black Death was something new and unknown in a society that valued stability and lack of change.
- The painful symptoms made the victims very weak.

How the Plague Spread

The plague spread rapidly along major trade routes, starting in more populated areas and spreading to the countryside. The important trade center of Florence, Italy, was one of the first cities to experience the epidemic. Places that were far from trade and central Europe tended to be more isolated. Therefore, these areas didn’t have many cases of the plague. In fact, some of these areas didn’t have any cases.
Reactions to the Plague

During medieval times, people had no idea what caused disease. Even doctors lacked a deep understanding of how the human body worked. People thought “humors,” or substances in the body, caused the plague. They tried to rid the body of these humors by bleeding. During the process, doctors cut patients and let out some of their blood in the hope that the bad humors would flow out with the blood. Unfortunately, bleeding often killed patients rather than cured them.

Some people believed that the plague was spread through a “miasma” in the air. They wore masks or carried flowers and perfume in hopes of warding it off. Many people believed the plague was a punishment from God. Some people blamed specific groups of people for the plague. They often targeted minority groups, such as Jewish people. In 1349, a mob of Christians killed nearly 3,000 Jewish people in Erfurt, Germany. In many cities, including Paris, London, and Florence, people rioted and targeted these groups.

To escape the plague, people often fled towns and cities, thinking they would be safer in rural areas. However, rural areas were stricken too. In some rural areas, populations were nearly or completely wiped out. Fields lay fallow with no one to till them. Domestic animals ran wild. Cows, goats, and sheep were unprotected and fell victim to disease and predators. Without enough people to produce food, famine set in. In cities and towns, craftspeople no longer produced goods. Merchants didn’t engage in business. Eventually, trade and commerce stopped. Europe was on the verge of chaos and collapse.

What Really Caused the Black Death?

Rats spread the plague in Europe. The rats carried fleas, which in turn carried the bacteria causing the plague. When one of these fleas bit a human, it transferred the bacteria to that person. Plague doesn’t spread from person to person. Although the plague was contagious, it spread only when healthy people came into contact with insects carrying the bacteria. Today we know that microscopic life forms, such as bacteria and viruses, cause disease. But medieval people had no idea these things existed. They also had no concept of sanitation. Most people didn’t associate cleanliness with disease prevention. Rats and fleas were found in almost all homes. As a result, the plague spread rapidly.

Although the Black Death seems like an ancient tragedy, some cases of bubonic plague occur each year. But antibiotics can kill the bacteria and cure the victim. Victims have a high chance of
survival, especially if the disease is caught early. Good sanitation also keeps rats and plague-carrying fleas under control. This practice makes outbreaks rare in the developed world today.

After the Black Death

In addition to causing widespread death, the Black Plague had many short- and long-term effects on society. Not all of them were negative. In fact, the plague produced an economic boom—a sudden increase in wages, productivity, and trade.

By 1348, the plague’s spread had slowed. Although the disease wasn’t completely eliminated, cases became rarer. These factors helped end the plague:

- quarantining, or keeping infected individuals in their homes
- improved hygiene, such as boiling drinking water and regular bathing
- decreased travel

Before the plague, manors dominated rural areas. These lands were owned by feudal lords and rented out to peasants. Peasants were bound to the land and worked for the lord their entire lives. They could never rise in social class. But when many lords died during the plague, some peasants were able to buy land.

It was still difficult for people to rise from one social class to the next, but the possibility increased after the plague. A peasant who owned land didn’t have to pay rent, so he could keep a larger portion of his earnings. These earnings would continue to increase from generation to generation. Over time, a descendant of the peasant could become wealthy enough to own a large estate.

The decrease in population meant there were fewer skilled workers. The remaining workers were now in a better position. Craftspeople in cities, such as blacksmiths and woodcarvers, could demand higher wages. The increased earnings allowed them to buy larger homes or even start their own businesses. Some became merchants. Wealthy tradespeople and merchants, especially in cities, could acquire property and influence.

Urban Renewal and the Growth of Cities

Cities often are centers of power and culture. They served this role during the ancient days of Europe as well, especially during the Roman Empire. However, urban life started to decline during the early Middle Ages. During feudal times, power and culture centered on the great manors ruled by lords.

After the Black Death, though, many people moved to the cities to find work. Manors became less powerful. Europe was still largely an agricultural society. But as people moved to the cities, urban centers regained population and became stronger socially and economically.

Italy was the first place where cities started to grow. It was the first region to experience the plague, and the first to recover after the epidemic ended.