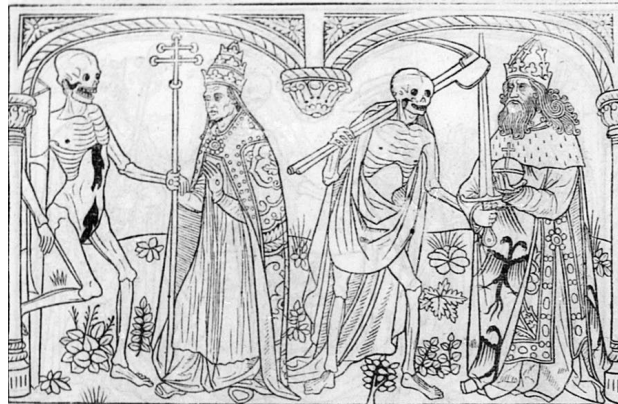


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Danse Macabre des Hommes - Un Pape et un Roi - Paris, 1486
BNF [ark:/12148/btv1b2200008n](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:fr:bf3-12148/btv1b2200008n)

Teaching the Black Death in Times of COVID: Secondary Education Instructor Version

This unit compares two pandemics, the Black Death of the fourteenth century and COVID-19, in order to facilitate deeper understandings of both.

Relationship to the [New York State Grades 9-12 Social Studies Framework](#)

- This version of the unit is intended for secondary school students in grade nine, particularly for unit 9.4 (Rise of Transregional Trade Networks), as outlined in the NYS framework. This is intended to be a flexible model - classes can be added, removed or switched at the teacher's discretion.
- Each of the readings, activities and assignments in the following five classes are included in order to fulfill the following aspects of the NYC Framework, among others:
 1. Create meaningful and persuasive understandings of the past by fusing disparate and relevant evidence from primary and secondary sources and drawing connections to the present.
 2. Identify, describe, and evaluate evidence about events from diverse sources (including written documents, works of art, photographs, charts and graphs, artifacts, oral traditions, and other primary and secondary sources).
 3. Identify, analyze and evaluate the relationship between multiple causes and effects (time, continuity, and change)
 4. Identify and compare similarities and differences between historical developments over time and in different geographical and cultural contexts.
 5. Identify, analyze, and evaluate the relationship between the environment and human activities, how the physical environment is modified by human activities, and how human activities are also influenced by Earth's physical features and processes.

- At the heading of each class session, the numbers within brackets [...] relate to the relevant learning outcome for this class as put forth in the New York State Social Studies Practices. These selected outcomes are not exhaustive, as each class fulfills multiple outcomes as set forth in the linked document.

Notes:

- COVID-19 continues to disrupt the traditional approaches to education, necessitating online classes and increased asynchronous learning; therefore, this unit incorporates both synchronous and asynchronous learning, with the synchronous, discussion portion taking the place of traditional classroom lectures; it qualifies, therefore, as a flipped classroom.
- From my own experience, student interest and investment during a synchronous session tends to flag at around thirty to forty-five minutes regardless of platform (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet), particularly as students are frequently participating in multiple sessions each day. Therefore the synchronous portion is formatted to last about forty minutes, though this can change at instructor's discretion.

Texts:

Whenever possible, I have endeavored to select source material that is freely available and not subject to paywalls. For primary source material regarding the plague, however, the following text is indispensable and well worth the purchase cost:

- Rosemary Horrox ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester Medieval Sources Series).
Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.

All readings marked "Horrox" come from this text.

Platforms:

- For Sharing Reading and Video Materials Asynchronously: Blackboard, Google Classroom, Course Website, Google Drive
- For Discussing Synchronously: Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Microsoft Teams
- For Annotating Texts: Google Docs, Perusall

Class One: Confrontation between Human and Nature [NYS Aspects A2, B1, C1, D2]

Learning Outcomes:

1. Create a map tracking the spread of the Black Death across Europe, north Africa and the Middle East.
2. Describe why it spread the way that it did.
3. Explain how the relationship between humans and the environment can lead to outbreaks of disease.

Before Class Tasks:

1. Create and upload a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture giving an overview of the spread of the Black Death: how does it spread? What are the symptoms? How many people did it kill?

- a. **NB:** The introduction to Horrox, Part One: Narrative Accounts, is a good place to start.
2. Distribute the following readings to the students to read, annotate and consider before the class session:
 - a. Horrox, Document One: Gabriele de Musis, The Arrival of the Plague [13 pages]
 - i. **NB:** de Musis, though an incredible source, can be long-winded. Feel free to excerpt.
 - a. Patrick J. Kiger, "[How the Black Death Spread along the Silk Road](#)", *History*, April 23, 2020
 - a. Jason Beaubien, "[Why They're Called 'Wet Markets' - And What Health Risks They Might Pose](#)," *NPR*, January 31, 2020

In Class Tasks:

1. Lead Activity 1 [~40 minutes]

Class Two: Confrontation between Knowable and Unknowable [NYS Aspects A1, B4, C4]

Learning Outcomes:

- a. Outline and describe the various causes of the Black Death as recorded by the Paris faculty of medicine.
- b. Compare and contrast their understanding of the body, natural world, and universe to these same understandings today, identifying differences and similarities.

Before Class Tasks:

1. Prepare and upload a short (~15 minutes) lecture regarding medieval cosmology, humoral and miasma theory, and ideas of disease causation.
 - a. **NB:** Horrox, Introduction to Part Two: Explanations and Responses provides a useful overview, though it should be supplemented with works more focused on medieval medical theory, such as Luke Demaitre's *Medieval Medicine* or Nancy Siraisi's *Medieval and Renaissance Medicine*.
2. Assign and Distribute the following paired readings to the students and provide them with sufficient time to read and annotate prior to the synchronous class session:
 - a. Horrox, Document Fifty-Six: Extract from Paris Medical Faculty, Report on the Causes of the Plague [7 pages]
 - b. Katherine Schaeffer, "[Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe COVID-19 was made in a Lab](#)", Pew Research, April 8, 2020

During Class Tasks:

1. Lead and moderate discussion (~30-40 minutes)
 - a. How did medieval people try to explain something that seemed unexplainable?
 - b. Did these explanations make sense to their understanding of the world around them?
 - c. What sorts of misinformation or misunderstandings have occurred as our society grapples with a new disease outbreak and developing treatment?
 - d. What similarities or differences do you observe?

Class Three: Confrontation between the “Insider” and the “Other” [NYS Aspects: A3, B1, C6, F4]

Learning Outcomes:

1. Consider what identifying aspects make groups into “others” during pandemics, including the Black Death and Coronavirus
2. Examine why these aspects or characteristics make these individuals or groups susceptible to targeting
3. Analyze if the groups targeted have changed over time, and if so, why.

Before Class Tasks:

1. Create and upload a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture on ideas of “other” in the Middle Ages.
 - b. **NB:** It is important to note in the lecture that when we speak of the “other”, we are not talking simply about ethnic differences. Students often immediately apply the idea of the “other” to race (and no wonder given increasing racial tensions within our current milieu), but it is not solely a racial idea within both medieval and modern societies; during the Black Death, for example, the “other” encompassed not only Jews, but strangers, the poor, and people considered unmoored or peripatetic, including pilgrims and prostitutes. Furthermore, the idea of medieval Europe as composed purely of white people is a persistent and incorrect characterization that we have a responsibility to combat, particularly as symbols of the medieval European past have been co-opted by fascist and nationalist groups in Europe and America. One good place to start would be Geraldine Heng’s “Reinventing Race, Colonizations, and Globalisms Across Deep Time: Lessons from the Longue Duree”; another is Andrew Albin, Mary C. Erler, et. al. (eds.), *Whose Middle Ages?: Teachable Moments for an Ill-Used Past*.
3. Assign and Distribute the following paired readings to the students and provide them with sufficient time to read and annotate prior to the synchronous class session:
 - a. Horrox, Document Seventy-One: “Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy” [8 pages]
 - b. Neil G. Ruiz, et. al., “[Many Black and Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid the COVID-19 Outbreak](#)”, Pew Research Center, July 1 2020
4. **NB:** If time remains or the unit can be expanded, consider how these lessons about the hardening of social boundaries during pandemics can be in dialogue with the treatment of marginalized groups during other periods of societal stress, including economic (the rhetoric of immigrants “taking our jobs”, for example), political (ex: the Red Scare), or religious (ex: antipathy between Catholics and Protestants during The Troubles of Northern Ireland)

In Class Tasks:

Distribute and Discuss Activity 2

- a. **NB:** for remote learning, feel free to screen share and display the images one at a time. For asynchronous learning, consider allowing students to annotate the image using a tool like google docs or perusall, or to write short responses.

After Class Tasks:

1. Distribute Hannah Marcus, "[What the Plague can Teach us about Coronavirus](#)," *New York Times*, March 1st, 2020. This article acts as a synthesis and ensures that the students are roughly on the same page heading into the next class.

Class Four: Confrontation between Tradition and Transformation [NYS Aspects A2, B1, B3, C3]

Before Class Tasks:

1. Create and upload a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture on the rituals of death and dying in medieval Europe: confession, last rites, funeral mass, burial in consecrated ground, etc.
 - a. **NB:** Try John Henderson, "The Black Death in Florence: Medical and Communal Responses," in *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100-1600*, ed. By Stephen Bassett (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 136-150. See also Simon Thomas, [Ars Moriendi - The Art of Dying](#), Polonsky Digitization Project, accessed October 26, 2020; [Ars Moriendi](#), Encyclopedia.com,
2. Assign and Distribute the following readings to the students and provide them with sufficient time to read and annotate prior to the synchronous class session:
 - a. Horrox, Document Two: Giovanni Boccaccio, Extract from the *Decameron* [7 pages]
 - b. Isabelle Cristo, "[Bringing Out the Dead in New York City](#)," *The New Republic*, April 10, 2020 [May be replaced with Simon Bray, "Loved and Lost: Grief in the Time of Coronavirus," *The Guardian*, August 21 2020]
 - c. Christopher Robbins, "[Mass Burials on Hart Island Increase Fivefold as COVID-19 Death Toll Skyrockets](#)," *The Gothamist*, April 9, 2020.

In Class Tasks:

1. Lead and moderate discussion (~30-40 minutes)
 - a. How did the Black Death disrupt rituals of death, dying and commemoration?
 - b. How did medieval people respond to these changes?
 - c. What, if any, resonances do the answers to these questions have for us today, living and dying in the midst of a global pandemic?

After Class Tasks:

1. Read and mark student responses to the images from the class materials. If certain answers are similar, or students have the same responses, consider sharing that information.

Class Five: Confrontation between the Powerful and Powerless [NYS Aspects A7, B5, E3]

Learning Outcomes:

1. Identify and explain ways in which the economy of medieval Europe was altered by the Black Death.
2. Describe how COVID-19 has affected the U.S. economy.
3. Compare and contrast these two situations, explaining differences and similarities.

Before Class Tasks:

1. Create and upload a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture covering the basics of the medieval European economy, including vassalage, feudalism, and the agricultural regime.
2. Assign and Distribute the following paired readings to the students and provide them with sufficient time to read and annotate prior to the synchronous class session:
 - a. Horrox, Documents Ninety-Seven and Ninety-Eight: A Reduction in Labour Services & The Statute of Labourers, 18 June 1349 [3 pages]
 - b. Rakesh Kochhar, "[Unemployment Rate is Higher than Officially Recorded, More so for Women and Certain Other Groups](#)" Pew Research Center, June 30, 2020

In Class Tasks:

1. Distribute and Discuss Activity 3 (~20 minutes)
2. Lead and Moderate Class Discussion (~20 minutes)
 - a. How does society change during epidemics and pandemics? How do such outbreaks alter the economy, demography, mental states, and social roles?
 - b. How did the workforce change during the Black Death, and how has it changed during COVID? Are these changes similar or different, and why?
 - c. What sorts of societal changes or transformation, accomplished either peacefully or through violent means, occurred as part of these pandemics? Why?

After Class Tasks:

1. Distribute Horrox, "Part Three: Consequences", which will help synthesize all information and materials for this unit.