



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)

The Black Death and Coronavirus: Changes and Continuities

Texts:

You will **not** be required to purchase a textbook for this course unit. Readings will be available online, either through our course website/blackboard, or open-access.

Black Death Primary Source readings come from Rosemary Horrox ed. and trans., *The Black Death* (Manchester Medieval Sources Series). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.

Module Goals:

By the end of this module, learners should be able to:

1. Compare and contrast the societal responses of late medieval Europe and America in the present day to pandemic outbreaks.
2. Explain why and how social boundaries and behavior change during outbreaks of disease.
3. Evaluate the economic consequences of pandemics and compare/contrast the consequences of the two outbreaks studied.
4. Describe how outbreaks of disease alter social norms and rituals and evaluate the impacts of these changes.

Class One: Confrontation between Human and Nature

Learning Outcomes:

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

Before Class Tasks:

1. As you prepare for class, ask yourself what areas of commonality you see between the descriptions of the Black Death in Europe and the global COVID pandemic. Consider how the relationship between humans and the environment (including animals, plants and insects) increases the risk of pandemics; how did this changing relationship contribute to the Black Death and COVID?
2. Watch the pre-recorded lecture that provides an overview of the Black Death of the fourteenth century.
3. Read and Annotate the following:
 - a. Horrox, Document One: Gabriele de Musis, The Arrival of the Plague
 - b. [“Mapping the novel Coronavirus Pandemic”](#), last updated September 11, 2020
4. Read ONE of the following texts - you do not need to annotate, but it will provide further context for class discussion.
 - a. Patrick J. Kiger, [“How the Black Death Spread along the Silk Road”](#), *History*, April 23, 2020
 - b. Jason Beaubien, [“Why They’re Called ‘Wet Markets’ - And What Health Risks They Might Pose,”](#) *NPR*, January 31, 2020
 - c. The City University of New York, [“Study Shows NYC Covid-19 Outbreak had European and U.S. Origins”](#), *Medical Press*, June 3, 2020.

In Class Tasks:

1. Complete Activity One - Mapping Pandemics
2. Class Discussion:
 - a. How and why did medieval Europeans’ increased connectivity to societies outside their own, including Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, increase their susceptibility to disease outbreaks?
 - b. How has the increasing interconnectedness of our globe increased or decreased our susceptibility to disease?

After Class Tasks:

1. Read Horrox, “Part One: Narrative Accounts” to summarize the information from the lecture.
2. Read over discussion notes.

Class Two: Confrontation between Knowable and Unknowable

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. As you prepare for class, consider how societies seek to explain natural phenomena (ex: the legends of the constellations to explain the movement of the stars, curses to explain crop failure, etc.). Why do people do this? How do they develop these explanations?

2. Watch the pre recorded lecture about medieval European understandings of the universe and disease.
3. Read one of the following pairs of documents, assigned by the instructor:
 - a. Pair One:
 - i. Horrox, Document Fifty-Six: Extract from Paris Medical Faculty, Report on the Causes of the Plague
 - ii. Katherine Schaeffer, "[Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe COVID-19 was made in a Lab](#)", Pew Research, April 8, 2020
 - b. Pair Two:
 - i. Horrox, Document Fifty-Nine: Bengt Knutsson, Extract from *A Little Book for the Pestilence* (beginning with "These things before" and ending with "I have proved myself")
 - ii. "[Coronavirus: Man Dies Taking Fish Tank Cleaner as Virus Drug](#)", BBC, March 24 2020

During Class:

1. Class Discussion Questions:
 - 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. How have authorities explained the outbreak of COVID-19?
 - d. What sorts of misinformation or misunderstandings have occurred as our society grapples with a new disease outbreak and developing effective treatments?
 - e. What similarities or differences do you observe?

After Class:

1. Read Horrox, "Introduction to Part Two: Explanations and Responses"

Class Three: Confrontation between the "Insider" and the "Other"

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. As you prepare for class, consider what makes someone an "other" - how does this identity change depending on who is asked to decide?
1. Watch the pre-recorded lecture (~15 minutes) on the idea of "others" in the Middle Ages.
2. Read and Annotate the paired sources distributed by your instructor.
 - a. Pair One:

- i. Horrox, Document Seventy-One: “Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy”
- ii. 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
- b. Pair Two:
 - i. Horrox, Document Seventy-Four: “Accusations of Well-Poisoning against the Poor”
 - ii. Dian Septiari, “[Rohingya Refugees Rejected Everywhere as Countries Grapple with COVID-19 Concerns](#),” *The Jakarta Post*, April 26, 2020

In Class Tasks:

1. Complete Activity Two - Medieval Images of the “Other”
2. Class Discussion:
 - a. What groups were considered “others” during the Black Death? Why? Was this a fair characterization in your opinion?
 - b. What groups are currently being blamed or targeted for the outbreak of COVID-19?
 - c. Have these groups changed? Why or why not?

After Class Tasks:

1. Read Hannah Marcus, “[What the Plague can Teach us about Coronavirus](#),” *New York Times*, March 1st, 2020

Class Four: Confrontation between Tradition and Transformation

Before Class Tasks:

1. As you prepare for class, think about the process of dying, burial, and commemoration in the modern day U.S.: What makes a “good” death? How has COVID disrupted these processes?
2. Watch the pre-recorded lecture on the medieval *ars moriendi* (the art of dying) and rituals and traditions related to death and dying in medieval Europe.
3. Familiarize yourself with the images from Danièle Cybulski, “[Memento Mori: Medieval Images of Death](#)”, *Medievalists.net*, accessed October 19, 2020
4. Read and Annotate the following sources:
 - a. Horrox, Document Two: Giovanni Boccaccio, Extract from the *Decameron* [7 pages]
 - b. Isabele Cristo, “[Bringing Out the Dead in New York City](#),” *The New Republic*, April 10, 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. Discussion
 - 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. Write a short (~250) word response to ONE of the images you observed in preparation for class; these images can be photographs, woodcuts, paintings, or anything else that caused an intellectual or emotional response.

Class Five: Confrontation between the Powerful and Powerless

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 economy.
3. Compare and contrast these two situations, explaining differences and similarities.

Before Class Tasks:

1. As you prepare for class, think about how pandemics change societies economically. Who loses jobs first? What changes do you think will be long-lasting?
2. Watch the pre-recorded lecture (~15 minutes) on the medieval economy.
3. Read and Annotate one of the two paired sources assigned and distributed by your instructor.
 - a. Pair One:
 - i. Horrox, Document Seventy-Six: Giovanni Boccaccio on the Death of Friends [2 pages]
 - ii. Simon Bray, "[Loved and Lost: Grief in the Time of Coronavirus](#)," *The Guardian*, August 21 2020
 - b. Pair Two:
 - i. Horrox, Documents Ninety-Seven and Ninety-Eight: A Reduction in Labour Services & The Statute of Labourers, 18 June 1349 [3 pages]
 - ii. 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 - Landlords and Laborers
2. Discussion
 - 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. Read Horrox, "Part Three: Consequences", which will help synthesize all information and materials for this unit.

2. Read and complete the final assignment, as distributed by your instructor.