



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

Teaching the Black Death in Times of COVID: Instructor Guidelines

Notes:

- This is intended to be a flexible model - classes can be added, removed or switched at the teacher's discretion. Ideas for expansion include adding a class to the beginning of the unit to go over the basics of the Black Death outbreak of the 14th century, including transmission and symptoms, and similar information regarding the novel coronavirus, for example; other topics include genomic sequencing, artistic representations of pandemic disease, and pandemics and the family, among others.
- COVID-19 continues to disrupt the traditional approaches to education, necessitating online classes and increased asynchronous learning; therefore, this syllabus is designed for a flipped classroom and a hybrid model, incorporating both synchronous and asynchronous learning. 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.
- Generally the sources selected are appropriate for upper level secondary school or first- or second-year university students. Sources that are more useful for senior level college students or graduate students are marked with a *.

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.

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

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.
 - b. [“Mapping the novel Coronavirus Pandemic”](#), last updated September 11, 2020
 - i. *May be supplemented with Spiteri, et. al., [“First cases of coronavirus disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in the WHO European Region, 24 January to 21 February 2020”](#), *Eurosurveillance* 25 (2020): doi: [10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.9.2000178](#)
3. Upload the following readings to the course website; students will pick **one** to read, digest and bring to in class discussion:
 - a. Patrick J. Kiger, [“How the Black Death Spread along the Silk Road”](#), *History*, April 23, 2020 [May be supplemented or replaced with *John Masson Smith,

“Mongol Campaign Rations: Milk, Marmots, and Blood?,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* 8 (1984), 223-28]

- b. [“Mongolian Couple Died of Plague after Eating Raw Marmot”](#), *Live Science*, May 8 2019
- c. Jason Beaubien, [“Why They’re Called ‘Wet Markets’ - And What Health Risks They Might Pose,”](#) *NPR*, January 31, 2020 [*May be replaced with: Robert G. Webster, “Wet Markets - A Continuing Source of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and Influenza?” *The Lancet* 363 (2004): 234-236.]
- d. The City University of New York, [“Study Shows NYC Covid-19 Outbreak had European and U.S. Origins”](#), *Medical Press*, June 3, 2020. [May be replaced with: *Ana S. Gonzalez-Reiche et. al., [“Introductions and Early Spread of SARS-CoV-2 in the New York City Area”](#), *Science* 17 (2020), DOI: 10.1126/science.abc1917]

In Class Tasks:

1. Lead the following activity [~20 minutes]:
 - a. Compare and contrast [this map](#) of the spread of the Black Death to [this graphic](#) depicting the spread of coronavirus. Why did they spread the way they did? What has changed?
 - i. **NB:** The first map, which is static, focuses only on the date of the pathogen’s arrival, not numbers of infections. The second graphic, however, is animated, and demonstrates both the dates at which governments noted the first infection within the country [the date at which the country becomes highlighted in yellow] and numbers of infections within the given country [represented by red circles]. Why would these two representations of a pandemic differ, and how do these differences alter our understanding of the data?
2. Lead and Moderate Class Discussion [~20 minutes]
 - 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? How has the increasing interconnectedness of our globe increased or decreased our susceptibility to disease?
 - b. How does the relationship between humans, animals, and insects lead to epidemics and pandemics? Compare and contrast the Black Death and COVID-19 through this lens specifically.
 - c. **NB:** for an expanded unit or full class, for example on Disease and Western Civilization, these questions could be expanded to include the role of disease in the Columbian Exchange and the colonization of the Americas.

Class Two: Confrontation between Knowable and Unknowable

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. Pair One:
 - i. Horrox, Document Fifty-Six: Extract from Paris Medical Faculty, Report on the Causes of the Plague [7 pages]
 - 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") [~ 2 pages]
 - ii. "[Coronavirus: Man Dies Taking Fish Tank Cleaner as Virus Drug](#)", BBC, March 24 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?

After Class Tasks:

1. Distribute Horrox, "Introduction to Part Two: Explanations and Responses" [18 pages]. This article acts as a synthesis and ensures that the students are roughly on the same page heading into the next class.

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

Before Class Tasks:

1. Create and upload a short (~15 minutes) pre-recorded lecture on ideas of "other" in the Middle Ages.
 - e. **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*.

4. 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. Pair One: Horrox, Document Seventy-One: "Examination of the Jews captured in Savoy" [8 pages]; 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: Horrox, Document Seventy-Four [~1 page] : "Accusations of Well-Poisoning against the Poor"; Dian Septiari, "[Rohingya Refugees Rejected Everywhere as Countries Grapple with COVID-19 Concerns](#)," *The Jakarta Post*, April 26, 2020

In Class Tasks:

1. Moderate Class Discussion (~30-40 minutes):
 - a. Consider what identifying aspects make groups into "others" during pandemics, including the Black Death and Coronavirus
 - b. Examine why these aspects or characteristics make these individuals or groups susceptible to targeting
 - c. Analyze if the groups targeted have changed over time, and if so, why.
 - d. **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)

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.

Supplementary Sources:

- Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "The Black Death and the Burning of Jews," *Past and Present* 196 (2007): 3-36.
- Peter I. Rose, review of *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, by Frank M. Snowden, *Nature Public Health Emergency Collection*, July 2020, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7371815/>

Class Four: Confrontation between Tradition and Transformation

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 paired readings to the students and provide them with sufficient time to read and annotate prior to the synchronous class session:
 - a. Pair One:
 - i. Horrox, Document Two: Giovanni Boccaccio, Extract from the *Decameron* [7 pages]
 - ii. Isabele Cristo, “[Bringing Out the Dead in New York City](#),” *The New Republic*, April 10, 2020 [May be replaced or supplemented with Simon Bray, “Loved and Lost: Grief in the Time of Coronavirus,” *The Guardian*, August 21 2020]
 - b. Pair Two:
 - i. Horrox, Document Eighty-Four: Burial Problems in Worcester [½ page]
 - ii. 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

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.
 - a. **NB:** Consider starting with the following readings:
 - i. Samuel J. Cohn, “After the Black Death: Labour Legislation and Attitudes towards Labour in late-medieval western Europe,” *Economic History Review* 60 (2007): 457-485.
 - ii. J.L. Bolton, “‘The World Upside Down’: Plague as an Agent of Economic and Social Change” in *The Black Death in England*, ed. By W. Mark Ormrod and P.G. Lindley (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 1996), 17-78.
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. 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. Lead and moderate 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. Distribute Horrox, "Part Three: Consequences" [18 pages] to act as a wrap up and synthesis of the material covered in this unit.
2. Distribute a final assignment for the module. Ideas include:
 - a. Writing an Op-Ed Piece on what the Black Death in Europe has to say to us today, living with COVID.
 - b. Developing a short podcast (10-15 minutes) about some aspect or theme covered in class.
 - c. Contributing to a visual archive comparing medieval images of the plague to modern photographs, drawings, or other visual representations of life during the COVID-19 pandemic.