



Detail of *Triumph of Death* (1597), Jan Brueghel. Oil on canvas, 119 cm × 164 cm. Steiermärk. Landesmuseum Joanneum. © akq-images.

## A WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: HOW THE BLACK DEATH AFFECTED EUROPE

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### A SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Reread lines 1–4.

**Paraphrase** the main idea that this article will explore.

**hierarchy** (hī'ə-rār'kē)  
*n.* an organization of people according to rank

**S**ubstantial changes in population often have dramatic effects on society. The bubonic plague, which in just four years killed up to one-third of the people in Europe, almost literally turned Europe's social structure upside down. **A**

Life in the Middle Ages centered around a **hierarchy** called the feudal system. Noble lords lived in castles or manors, which were surrounded by acres of land. The nobles depended on peasants to farm their land. In turn, peasants received protection, shelter, and a small plot of land to plant their own crops. According to the Christian church, the feudal system was God's  
10 plan, and no one questioned the authority of the church.

In the 300 years before the Black Death, the European population tripled. Additional land was cultivated, but food was still scarce. Some peasants left



### ◀ Analyze Visuals

What might the skeletons in this painting symbolize, or stand for?

for a better life in the city, where merchants and craftsmen were beginning to thrive. The now-crowded cities, however, could not handle the overflow of unskilled laborers.

After gunpowder was invented, the lords had found it harder to defend their castles. They also experienced some bad harvests, and many had to **cope** with the consequences of a war between France and England. Yet, they remained in control.

20 **T**hen, without warning, the Black Death swept through Western Europe, killing 25 million people. Some families were wiped out. Large estates were left without heirs. Survivors moved in and claimed any property they could find. Cities and towns lost people by the thousands. Monasteries,<sup>1</sup> which previously had as many as 150 monks, now had only seven or eight. In all, thousands of villages were abandoned. **B**

Agriculture was also in **disarray**. The tools and land were there, but suddenly the workers were missing. Food prices dropped, and there was even a surplus of food where once many had barely had enough to stay alive.

30 Because workers were scarce, peasants who survived the plague now had bargaining power for the first time. Resentment among the working class led to violence and revolt in the centuries that followed, as Europe teetered between the old feudal system and a new economic system.

**cope** (kōp) *v.* to struggle with and act to overcome

### **B** CAUSE AND EFFECT

Reread lines 20–25. What effects of the Black Death does the author describe?

**disarray** (dī's'ə-rā') *n.* a state of disorder; confusion

1. **monasteries:** buildings where religious men called monks live, work, and pray together.

**artisan** (är'tī-zən) *n.* a person who is skilled in a trade

**C CAUSE AND EFFECT**

Reread lines 30–45. What clue words help you recognize the pattern of organization?

**recurrence** (rĭ-kūr'əns) *n.* the act of happening again; return

**D INTERPRET GRAPHIC AIDS**

What was the population of western Europe in the early 1300s?

The shortage of skilled craftsmen caused an industrial crisis. Unlike agricultural workers, craftsmen require long apprenticeships, and now there were few replacements when any skilled **artisan** died. Reduced production forced prices of saddles, farm tools, and other goods to soar. **C**

This depopulation crisis, however, encouraged technological developments. The most notable labor-saving invention was the printing press, developed around 1450. One such press replaced hand-copying by hundreds of scribes.<sup>2</sup>

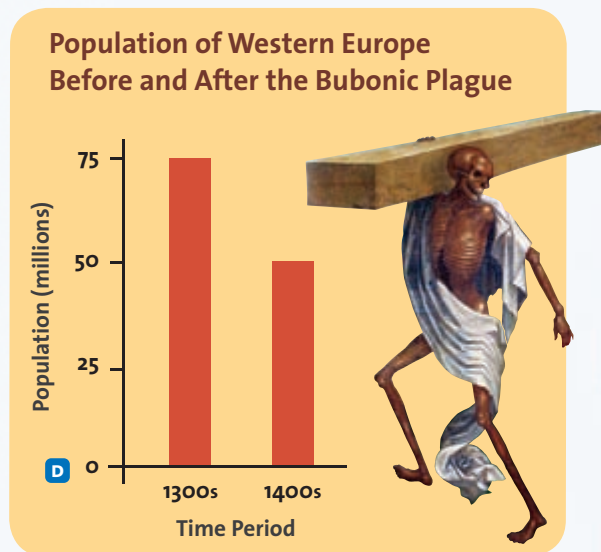
The Black Death affected the entire medieval social structure. When the pestilence returned a few years later, people were even more terrified. Its unpredictable **recurrence** in the following decades was enough to keep Europeans in constant fear. A mood of gloom swept across Europe, and many began to question the authority of the church. In fact, they began to have doubts about their entire world view. Yet, it was this questioning that led to far-reaching reforms in religion, art, medicine, and science. Without a doubt, the Black Death forever changed Europe's economic and social structure.

2. **scribes:** people whose job was to copy manuscripts.



Survivors of the plague use a printing press to copy manuscript.

Illumination from *Chants royaux* (about 1500). Bibliothèque Nationale. © akg-images/VISIOARS.



Detail of *Danse Macabre. Pope* (1500s), Bernt Notke. Oil on canvas, 160 cm × 750 cm. St. Nicholas' Church, Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn, Estonia. © Bridgeman Art Library.