The Black Death of 1347-1351

In October, 1347, some Genoese trading ships returned from the Black Sea to Sicily. The ships were filled with sailors, who were dead or dying, and they had black swellings in their groins and armpits. Although there is some doubt, most historians think that they carried the bubonic plague, and from that ship, whatever disease they had, had spread across Europe and killed between one third and one half of Europe’s population at the time. It is estimated that 34 million died in Europe over the next four years, and plague epidemics hit Asia and the Middle East at the same time period, killing more people there and making the plague a multi-regional pandemic; it is estimated that up to two-thirds of China’s population may have died—approximately 25 million deaths. In Europe, the plague started in shipping-port cities and traveled along both land and sea trading routes to other centres. Although it had its most massive impact between 1347 and 1351 (the mid-14th century), the plague returned to Europe periodically until the last major outbreaks in the 17th and 18th centuries. In total, the Black Death is thought to have killed 237 million victims.

The plague came to be called the “Black Death” because patients’ skin turned black from bruising. It is thought that fleas feeding on black rats had the disease, and when the rats died off, the fleas transferred to human hosts, passing the disease on to them. The disease spread rapidly. The patients experience fever, diarrhea, headaches, and the formation of buboes, or swollen lymph nodes that ooze pus and blood. It can also proceed to the bloodstream and the lungs, after which point, it can be spread by coughing. Death was rapid, with most people dying within 4–7 days. Sometimes, people died within 24 hours of contracting the disease. Many people thought that the plague was punishment from God. The Pope had said that God had sent the pestilence to affect the Christian people. During the infectious period of the Black Death, people persecuted Jewish people and lepers, blaming them for the spread of the disease. Jewish people were forced out of cities by anti-Semitic rioters. Many Jewish communities were destroyed; many Jewish people were massacred.

Before the Black Death struck, Europe had already suffered from famine, so many people were susceptible to disease because of malnutrition and a weakened immune system. Once the Black Death struck, the impact was disastrous. Entire villages were abandoned, and with fewer people left to labour, Europeans experienced crop failures and further food shortages. As a result, prices rose, and the economy changed, along with social structures and the role of the church. For instance, with fewer people left to labour in fields, landowners had to offer the remaining peasants greater wages and freedoms, leading some to argue that the Black Death improved conditions for the surviving peasants. Another result of the Black Death was a turn towards morbidity in European culture. Much artwork and literature depicted death, and there was a sense of pessimism among the people.
Resources consulted include web sites relating to the Black Death:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_death
www.historyguide.org/ancient/lecture29b.html
HIV/AIDS in Africa and the rest of the world

HIV stands for Human immunodeficiency virus and AIDS stands for Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, the end stage of the infection. HIV is spread when there is contact between the mucous membrane or the bloodstream of an uninfected person and the blood, or other bodily fluids (semen, vaginal fluid, or breast milk) from a person infected with HIV. Such contact can occur through sexual contact, blood transfusion, the sharing of contaminated needles, or exchanges between mother and child during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding. HIV damages the immune system, making a person susceptible to “opportunistic infections.” An uninfected person’s immune system would be able to fight off these infections. These infections, and not AIDS itself, are what lead to the deaths of AIDS patients.

The transmission of HIV can be prevented, but studies show that many people around the world continue to engage in high-risk activities that enable the transmission of the HIV virus. Reasons are varied, and they range from ignorance about the ways that HIV can be transmitted and what methods can be used to prevent its transmission, to religious and cultural rules related to methods of reducing the chances of becoming infected (i.e. condom use), to myths about the transmission of HIV. Some people mistakenly believe that only gay people can get HIV and AIDS.

Since the discovery of the AIDS in 1981, myths and stigma have become associated with the disease. When it was first discovered, it was called GRID (Gay-related immunodeficiency disease). This was because it was first identified in a group of gay men. Even though scientists later discovered that anybody could get HIV, some people continue to believe that only gay people and intravenous drug users could contract the disease. This has led to stigmatization (mistreatment, discrimination against, and rejection) of gay people and those living with HIV. Some people mistakenly believed that gay people were the source of HIV, just by virtue of being gay, and people living with HIV had done something wrong in order to contract the virus.

AIDS is thought to have started in sub-Saharan Africa sometime in the twentieth century, and now it is considered to be a pandemic. Since the discovery of AIDS in 1981, it is thought to have killed more than 25 million people; this does not include the 40 million people (as of the end of 2003) that currently have HIV, 26 million of these people live in Africa. In 2005 alone, AIDS killed between 2.8 million and 3.6 million, more than 570,00 of those were children. Africa has been particularly hard hit by AIDS. In 2003, 2.3 million people died in sub-Saharan Africa; that’s one person every 13.7 seconds, 263 people every hour, and over 6000 people per day. AIDS is the number one cause of death in Africa, number four worldwide. AIDS has impacted people in Africa in many ways including increased costs (i.e. health care for society and families with patients), decreased food production (i.e. farmers stop working as much because of illness as to care for a sick family member), and the decimation of families and the creation of AIDS orphans (i.e. parents, wives, husbands, or children die from the disease).
Resources consulted include web sites relating to HIV/AIDS:
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AIDS
www.avert.org
www.aidsinafrica.net/