Black Death: Profound Economic Benefits For The People Of Europe

Introduction

The Black Death, while devastating, had a silver lining, and became an influential period of history which led to the development and evolution of Medieval times. Producing extensive scientific and economic benefits to the people of Europe, the Black Death revolutionised the medieval world through a series of breakthroughs in medicine and technology, and truly changed the course of history.

Before the plagues hit Europe, many countries were at the peak of their population and it was clear that there was not enough food to sustain all the people.

Deaths/Immune Systems

The Black Death was a pandemic that spread like wildfire: the disease spread through families, houses, villages, towns, and cities with astounding speed and staggering mortality. However, the Black Death did not kill indiscriminately. The plague essentially wiped out the people whose immune systems were weaker than others. An analysis of bones in London cemeteries from before and after the plague reveals that people had a lower risk of dying at any age after the first plague outbreak compared with before. 'In the centuries before the Black Death, about 10 per cent of people lived past age 70,' stated study researcher Sharon DeWitte, a biological anthropologist at the University of South Carolina. In the centuries after, more than 20 per cent of people lived past that age. We can infer from these statistics that the Black Death represented a strong force of natural selection and removed the weakest individuals on a very broad scale within Europe, and had a major impact in strengthening the immune systems of survivors, confirming that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Feudal System/Living Conditions

The Black Death completely altered the social structure of the Middle Ages as it caused the downfall of the feudal system; an economic, political, and social hierarchy in medieval Europe. When the Black Death struck, it was able to quickly and dramatically demolish the feudal system. We can recognise this through 14th-century records of Savarnak House in England, which show the wage per day for a peasant who worked on farms or in workshops. Through these documents, we notice that merely eleven years after the Black Death first occurred, peasants were earning double their wages. This is because the tragic depopulation created the shortage of workers and nobles were forced to pay peasants a higher wage to ensure work was completed. In other words, the peasants soon had the upper hand over their feudal masters.

Labour saving Technology

The eventual overthrowing of the feudal system brought along many benefits. The lack of workers and peasants spurred the development of labour-saving technology as people began

looking for new ways of accomplishing work to meet the growing demands of Europe’s economy. One of the greatest inventions following the Black Plague was Johann Gutenberg’s printing press, which came to replace a large number of monastic copyists who perished in the plague and allowed for books to be massed produced at an affordable price for a growing class of merchants, professionals, and craftsmen. Without the Black Death and the demolishing of the feudal system, Europe's development may have significantly hindered.

Power of the Church

Religion was central to medieval European life. Most people were illiterate and very superstitious and they relied heavily on the Church for education and guidance on events that happened around them. The vitality of religion in the Middle Ages is clearly illustrated by a 19th-century German engraving which shows a congregation of flagellants in the mid 14th century. Flagellants were a religious group who believed that catastrophic events such as the plague were God’s judgement on the sins of His people. They hoped that whipping themselves would gain forgiveness from God and stop the plague. This source suggests that the Black Death was a shocking event which caused many people to adopt extreme religious practices. More specifically, the engraving insinuates that little progress had been made in understanding the spread of disease, as the flagellants turned to religion, rather than science, to try to avoid the plague.

Moreover, when the Black Death struck, people grappled at religious theories in a feeble attempt to explain the disaster - the most common belief was that the plague was God's punishment on Earth due to all the sin. Consequently, when priests and high members of the church began dying, people rapidly lost faith in the church, and the Middle Ages was introduced to revolutionising medical advances, ideas, and practices. There was a greater emphasis on practical physical sciences and clinically orientated medicine, reflected by the growing influence of surgeons, as prayers and traditional medicine failed to provide a cure to the disease. The people were thus provided with a valuable starting point to begin curing various diseases. In the book, Power, Violence and Mass Death in Pre-Modern and Modern Times, Samuel K. Cohn Jr. explains that the Black Plague gave doctors a whole new range of practical experience. Before the plague, human anatomy remained a mystery as the dissection of human cadavers was forbidden by the Church. However, in 1348, the ban was lifted, thus enabling doctors to better understand the cause of the Black Death. The discoveries made during this time were the basis of all medical developments in Europe, enabling the people to secure themselves against future outbreaks.

Conclusion

The Black Plague brought profound economic benefits for the people of Europe, giving rise to new and exciting opportunities that presented significant changes to the known structure of society. The Black Plague led to the rise and development of labour-saving technology, which not only fulfilled the demands of Europe’s booming economy but also brought great welfare to its people. The disease of the Plague radically changed the way people viewed medicine, spurring numerous developments and ideas that enabled administrators to control subsequent diseases with a more scientific approach. The Black Plague shattered traditional, religious thinking, and allowed the people of Europe to open up their minds to new ideas that perhaps accelerated the medieval period into the Renaissance.