

**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CLASSES AND CULTURE IN EFFECTIVENESS OF  
VARIOUS METHODS OF PLAGUE PREVENTION DURING THE BUBONIC  
PLAGUE**

Divya Ananth, Jayashree Balaraman, Veena Gonugondla, Mehwish Hussain, Kavya Kadabageri, Harnoor Kaur, Sophia Olakangil, Sofia Sepulveda Pizarro, Ajab Shakir

East Brunswick High School, East Brunswick, United States  
Mrs. Danielle Bollaci

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## **Introduction**

The Black Death marked the turn of the 13th century in medieval Europe as it was the most widespread epidemic the world has ever seen. It changed the lives of thousands of people drastically in just days. Although sickness was common, it was never seen on such a large scale. The plague was known to have arrived sometime in October of 1347 and passed to Europe through twelve ships that docked at the Sicilian port of Messina. Despite Sicilian authorities hastily ordering the fleet of “death ships” to evacuate the Italian harbor, it was too late (History.com Editors). The disease was then spread rapidly throughout cities by rodents, animals that were pervasive during medieval times in Europe. The lack of adequate sewage systems and cleaning methods catalyzed the mushrooming of the disease. This, combined with the densely populated regions of Europe, facilitated the deadly spread of the plague.

Its novelty resulted in uncertainty on how to mitigate the spread. Over the next five years, the Black Death resulted in the decimation of one-third of the continent’s population (History.com editors). Understandably so, as their resources were not nearly as vast as the ones we have today. Their limited medical knowledge resulted in the reliance of measures based on religion and superstition. The access to preventive measures were dependent on social class. Despite the very idea of social classes being shifted as a result of the plague, they still played a crucial role in determining who got access to methods that were more effective. The upper class had the means to access better, more advanced preventive methods. Their wealth gave them the opportunity to escape the plague-infested areas. Unfortunately, the lower classes, which comprised most of society, were not as lucky, because they were forced to depend on less effective methods. People’s outlook towards the plague drastically changed as they experienced its detrimental effects. The time period, social classes, technology, and culture influenced the effectiveness and methods of plague prevention during the Black Death.

### **Most Effective Prevention Methods**

(Divya Ananth, Ajab Shakir)

The most effective way to prevent the spread of the plague is through quarantine, which through the first mandatory quarantine, which took place in Ragusa of the Republic of Venice (modern-day Dubrovnik, Croatia). Ragusa was a powerful port city; since the city's economy depended on trade, the trade ports had to stay open to keep the economy running. So to effectively stop the spread of the bubonic plague, Ragusa's Great Council implemented a quarantine order for any ships entering their port. Anyone entering the city through a ship or trade caravan was screened, and if they did not pass the screening they were taken to a hospital for people that exhibited plague symptoms. Ragusa built the first temporary plague hospital, and it was on the island of Mljet. This type of quarantine stop and plague hospital combination was called lazaretto, which was a place where people would get food, shelter, and other things that would promote health, and all of which was paid for by the government. Along with sending people to the island of Mljet, the Great Council of Ragusa passed a law saying that "those who come from plague-infested areas shall not enter [Ragusa] or its district unless they spend a month on the islet of Mrkan or in the town of Cavtat, for disinfection" (Roos). These areas were strictly for travelers and were used as a quarantine area to prevent the spread of the plague to the vulnerable city. There were hefty fines for citizens who did not abide by the quarantine laws, and the penalties were enough of a threat to make most people comply with the quarantine order. Ragusa was the first Mediterranean port that separated infected people and livestock from their healthy population to contain the spread of the plague because they realized it could be transmitted to and through animals. Ragusa's quarantine policies grew to be very effective, and have paved the way for quarantines around the world.

Like Ragusa, Venice was a port city of the Venitian Empire and it too was highly susceptible to the plague. According to Francesca Malagnini of the University for Foreigners,

a Venetian linguist and researcher of Lazzaretto Nuovo, the Venetians saw that the “only way to protect everyone’s health and allow the economy to continue” “was to separate people, to take away the sick people, or suspected sick people” (Stub). The island of Lazzaretto Vecchio was for quarantining Venetians with the plague to ensure the plague-free Venetians would not be in contact with them. The island of Lazzaretto Nuovo was as a port for ships from plague-stricken areas as an order required “ships arriving in Venice from infected ports... to sit at anchor for 40 days (quaranta giorni) before landing, a practice that eventually became known as quarantine” (Vuković). Later, Lazzaretto Nuovo changed from a monastery to a hospital for plague-stricken people. The island was completely reconstructed to accommodate for people who came to quarantine themselves there before entering Venice. “The new facility had 200 rooms for people and new warehouses for storage while using all shelters it could host up to 4000 people” (“Venice Quarantine Islands: Lazzaretto Nuovo”). Similar to the lazarettos in Ragusa, these lazarettos separated the livestock from the humans to prevent the plague from spreading to the animals.

Quarantine was effective because it kept healthy people together and away from the plague-stricken people. But, before quarantine and lazarettos came to exist, people had the idea to separate the healthy and sick. One of the earlier ideas is how "Jacob of Padua [had] advised establishing a place outside the city walls for treatment of ill townspeople and outsiders who came to town seeking a cure" (Mackowiak and Sehdev). This idea was put into effect but was not very effective. So the Grand Council of Ragusa put in place a more structured version of this, implementing the first mandatory quarantine. Although quarantine was not effective at first, with the cooperation of the public and other countries it became the best way to eradicate the plague from an area.

**Least Effective Prevention Methods**  
(Veena Gonugondla, Sophia Olakangil)

Although there were effective methods of plague prevention, the ineffective methods were more commonly used. Religion and inadequate resources led to the creation of numerous prevention techniques that have now been determined futile. The inability to discern effective vs. ineffective methods was caused by a limited medical knowledge of the nature of *Yersinia Pestis* as well as cultural practices.

Due to the influence of religion on people's lives, people blindly followed the beliefs of their religious leaders. The basis of these practices were rooted in superstition rather than science, as can be seen in the following examples. People assumed that a supreme being was responsible for the plague, and so, thought the cure for the plague must be religion based. It was believed that the plague was God's punishment for humanity's sins, and many looked to repent by flagellating their bodies. It was common for people to carry around religious medals and tokens, as a shield against the plague (Mark, Medieval Cures). Some prevention methods were counterintuitive: many gathered in large groups to hold a group fast or to listen to public sermons (Mark, Religious Responses). The people's close proximity resulted in the rapid increase of plague cases. People also believed that he somewhere provided a cure. This gray area was based on equal parts science and religion, and it involved removing all the miasma, bad air of an infected place, from their surroundings. They believed that miasma could be caused by unburied corpses, this was right to an extent; where they went wrong was in their disinfecting methods: fumigants, various perfumes, and lighting bonfires. Regardless of the fact that these methods seemed more rational, they were ineffective. Even with their limited knowledge, people knew this explanation was not complete; they needed a reason as to why only a select few were affected (Slack 437). To find this answer, the general public once again turned to religion.

Technology and research will undoubtedly advance as time continues, but in the 13th century — a time period without much access to licensed medical professionals, a form of fast communication, and materials— people were exposed to measures that were not proven to show intended results. Physicians were unable to cope with the outbreak because of their limited experiences and the fact that the epidemic was killing people faster than there could be a comprehensible solution. For example, people utilized techniques such as bloodletting and boil-lancing to treat patients diagnosed with the plague. However, this method was unsafe and unsanitary which compromised its practicality (History.com Editors). Another method that was widely used was bird masks which were thought to keep out bad smells, the believed cause of the plague. The appearance of the costume consisted of a full-length overcoat, a beak mask with strong smelling substances, and other outerwear. The beak of the bird mask held dried flowers, etc., believed to prevent the evil smell of the plague from coming near (Phillips). Animal cures proved to also be exceedingly popular among the medical community, ranging from using parts of snakes to pigeons to, most absurdly, unicorns (Mark, Medieval Cures). Centuries later scientists are still awaiting proof on the existence of unicorns, implying that those medications in the past that utilized unicorn parts, whether it be hair, horn or blood, are based on falsity. During the entirety of the plague, Quacks—people who falsely claimed to have skill in medicine— could be found on every street corner advertising mud potions as the ideal cure (Defoe). Unfortunately, all these methods were inefficacious as they were not backed by experimentation.

The repeated use of ineffective methods resulted in the continuous spread of the plague demanding an immediate solution to save lives. Even though the listed methods did not prevent people from catching the plague, the plague has had lasting effects on the future of medicine.

## Governments' Intervention Methods (Kavya Kadabageri)

The bubonic plague, one of the deadliest diseases humanity has ever faced, caused massive chaos, confusion, and misery as it quickly swept through Asia and Europe. Countries rushed to protect their people as best as they could. However, during the fourteenth century, physicians and health officials had little knowledge of viruses or bacteria to minimize the forest fire-like plague from spreading effectively. Nevertheless, through careful observation, they understood enough to implement some of the world's first prevention measures, such as self-quarantine and restricted ships to port.

When the plague made its way to Europe in Crimea through Italian trading ships, local authorities, for the first time, became involved in the public's health. In 1347, Venice, Italy, isolated boats for 30 days in port to make sure they were not infected. Venice was a port city, and it was necessary to ensure people entering this highly visited area were plague free. A year later, in 1348, measures were taken to formally close off Venetian ports to incoming vessels (Carr). "They knew that you had to be very careful with goods that are being traded, because the disease could spread on objects and surfaces and that you tried your best to limit person-to-person contact," says Jane Stevens Crawshaw, a professor at Oxford Brookes University (Roos).

Also, medical inspections were put in place where a plague doctor would come to check patients with suspected symptoms of the plague. Those infected would be prescribed 40 days of quarantine at home or the hospital ("Bubonic Plague: the First Pandemic"). Quarantine was 40 days long because it has a significance in Christianity, and the government's policies were often laced with religion. However, even with quarantine in place, the number of deaths continued to increase, wiping out 60 percent of Europe's entire population (Howard).

Perhaps the European government's intervention was ineffective because of the terrible living conditions many middle-class and low-class Europeans lived in. While the rich fled out of contaminated cities early on, the poor, the majority of the population, had little choice but to stay. The poor lived in unsanitary conditions, only attracting flies and rats into the area, worsening the plague. Although medieval doctors knew little of the plague's medical aspects, theories of it occurring from bad smells existed (Howard). Even so, the government took insufficient effort to clean up the reeking towns.

However, the opposite was true in 1893, colonial India, where the plague broke out in large cities such as Bombay. Acacia Viegas, a Goan doctor, identified the disease as the bubonic plague and started campaigns to kill rats and clean up the slums ("Bubonic Plague: the First Pandemic"). Cleaner streets helped reduce the spread to a degree. However, with the plague having affected Bombay, a populous city, controlling the disease was difficult. Thus, aggressive anti-plague measures were taken by the colonial authorities such as "home searches for victims, enforced evacuation of residents in infected areas, detention camps for travelers and the exclusion of traditional medicine practitioners from infected areas" ("Bubonic Plague: the First Pandemic"). With an aggressive government comes angry citizens, and 1893 was no different. Widespread protests arose, and various communities were in a panic. Murder of the British chairman of the Special Plague Committee —this committee imposed the restrictions— was also committed. As shown, violence against the government's implementation method limited the effectiveness of the measures.

While both the European and Colonial Indian governments had the same goal of controlling the bubonic plague, as did the rest of the world, their prevention measures were overall ineffective and had many limitations. These were the first times governments intervened in the spread of the plague, and as time passed, so did the governments' methods.

### **How different Social Classes were affected by the Plague**

(Mehwish Hussain, Sofia Sepulveda Pizarro)

The bubonic plague is well known for its implacable, merciless path across Europe. The word “plague” conjures images of corpses and people suffering on the streets of medieval cities. Although the idea of a plague is one of a widespread epidemic that affects everyone, those in the lower class comprised most of the dying and dead due to the disease that characterized the 14th century. This was due to the fact that they did not have access to the preventive measures the upper class had the benefit of taking.

Although no one was immune to the plague, those in the higher class had ways to access things that allowed them to protect themselves. For many of those in the upper class, this prevention was the ability to leave major cities at the start of a breakout. It is due to the cities' closely packed and highly populated nature that they are centers of contagion. Being away from these epicenters of plague allowed the rich to stay healthy during these times. This can be seen as the modern-day equivalent to having the benefit to self-isolate from the rest of the world.

However, even those in the upper class who remained in the cities had a much greater advantage over the rest of the population. According to Alan D. Dyer, the features of the buildings inhabited by different social groups “were a big factor when it comes to reasons for the localized spread of the Plague”. Specifically, he explains that the wealthy’s “well-maintained houses with tiled roofs would harbour far fewer rats than the ramshackle huts of the poor” (Dyer, 1978). In fact, this was exemplified in the summer of 1665, when London was faced with an outbreak of the plague, aldermen and justices remained in the city to do their jobs, yet none died.

In Girolamo Fracastoro’s words, “the nobility, on account of their wealth and other conveniences which the populace lacks, [could] take greater precautions against the sort of contagion that is transmitted from one person to another ” (1930). However, this was not the

only way in which the different classes were affected by the plague. In fact, the socioeconomic classes themselves underwent a change due to this disease.

Contrary to what one may believe, the bubonic plague actually ended up creating opportunities for Europe's lower class. Prior to the arrival of the plague, Europe was unequal. People in the lower class had fairly limited opportunities to hold power and gain land, and they were typically on the brink of starvation. However, following the bubonic plague was a twist of fate. The poor workers of the lower class found themselves in a position to negotiate with their employers. This was primarily due to the aftermath of the Black Death. Because it took a large part of the population with it as it died down, the wealthy upper class found that they no longer had peasants to do their work for them, as the lower class were more susceptible to the disease. Thus, they began to lure workers toward them from other areas by promising to pay them well, give them better working conditions, housing, and food ("Positives of the Black Plague").

The upper class began to feel threatened by laborers and peasants. They felt as though their position on the social hierarchy was no longer as prominent as it had been before. For instance, the nobility began to dress more extravagantly in order to emphasize their social standing (Given-Wilson). This alone demonstrates the hostility the upper class held for the lower class. However, regardless, the wealthy were unable to preserve their royal status. As peasants started buying small plots of land for themselves, land ownership became common, rather than elite ("Social and Economic Effects").

Furthermore, as the lower class began to earn more money, a direct result of owning land, many entrepreneurial opportunities became available to them. They were able to start various businesses, like baking bread and repairing shoes ("Social and Economic Effects"). In a short time, their businesses were able to make many of them quite wealthy. Those who were once peasants looking for scraps of food to eat had now become part of the stable,

middle class, who always had food on the table, and some of them even joined the affluent upper class.

The plague affected society in a variety of ways. When faced with an outbreak, the upper class was able to react and effectively protect themselves, highlighting the economic divide between social classes. Additionally, it redefined the idea of the social classes at the time. The Black Death was the savior of the lower class, as it ended feudalism. Unlike before, the poor now had access to land and they were able to fend for themselves and live an independent life, rather than serving the upper class.

## **Impact of the Bubonic Plague: Social and Economic Changes**

(Jayashree Balaraman, Harnoor Kaur)

As the plague spread rapidly, many people began to have a new perspective of religion. Some fought the plague with prayers feeling that God's wrath was descending upon man, while others followed the maxim, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die" (Courie). Overall, there was a loss of faith in religion after the plague, due to the death of so many clergy and because prayers had failed to prevent sickness and death (Courie). In Christian Europe, the Roman Catholic Church describes the plague as God's punishment. The European churches brought people together to pray, as well as organized marches. This was primarily to beg for forgiveness for their sins. A popular treatment at the time was "bleeding patients to remove the 'bad humor'" (Constitutional Rights Foundation). Many believed that if one had a proper balance of humors (fluids) in the body, their body was healthy. If one were to breathe "foul air or vapors" from "dead bodies, polluted water, or even gases released by earthquakes" their humors would become unbalanced (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

In 1348, there was a rumor claiming that Jews were "responsible for the plague as an attempt to kill Christians and dominate the world" (Britannica). The rumor spread quickly everywhere and was supported by a wide range of people. Many even believed that Jews had "poisoned wells in Switzerland" (Britannica). This rumor caused extreme violence against Jews. Christians began to attack Jewish communities, "burned their homes", and even "murdered them with clubs and axes" (Britannica). Christians went as far as to lock up and burn "900 Jews alive" in Strasbourg (Constitutional Rights Foundation). In October 1349, after seeing the extreme violence against Jews, "Pope Clement VI issued a religious order" to eradicate the violence against the Jews (Constitutional Rights Foundation). Because of this, some Christians began to turn their anger towards the Catholic Church which did not seem to do much to prevent and stop the Black Death. On top of that, many priests "either died of the plague or abandoned their parishes" when the Black Death began fueling the anger of the

Christians (Constitutional Rights Foundation). This resulted in thousands of people joining the Flagellant movement, where Christian men marched, sang hymns, and beat themselves with a whip as a way to repent their sins and plead to God to end the plague. End result, the Catholic Church “lost some of its authority,” igniting the start for the Protestant Reformation (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

The economy also experienced abrupt and extreme inflation and later deflation (Courie). Prior to the Black Death, Europe had a population of 75-80 million people and farm production failed to meet the needs of most, which resulted in famine, malnutrition and widespread poverty. With the bubonic plague reducing the population by 25-40 million people, the land could now produce a surplus of food (Constitutional Rights Foundation). For a short period the scarcity of farm labor and the danger and difficulty of producing goods and obtaining them through trade caused the prices of both local and imported products to skyrocket (Courie). However, with fewer consumers the demand for food went down, lowering the prices of goods. As mentioned prior, this was not a good sign for the elite because it meant a rise in the price of labor due to the lack of workers but continuing demand for people to cultivate the land (Britannica). With many tenant farmers, laborers, and craftsmen killed off, those who survived demanded “lower farmland rents, higher wages, and higher prices for their handmade goods” (Constitutional Rights Foundation). Serfs, agricultural laborers bound under the feudal system to work on their lord's estate, were no longer tied to their master. If a serf left a land, another owner would instantly hire them and adhere to their demanded reductions of feudal duties (Courie). Lords worked hard to present profitable changes for the peasants and keep them on their land, the shortage of labour compelled them to substitute wages or money rents in place of labour services in an effort to keep their tenants (Britannica). Craftsmen also demanded higher prices for their goods (Constitutional Rights Foundation). All of these changes led to a general rise in wages for the

lower classes while cutting the income of land owners (Britannica). The standard of living was subsequently raised, and peasants felt more empowered (Courie). In fact, serfdom disappeared in most of Western Europe by the mid-1400s (Constitutional Rights Foundation). Higher incomes for more people would stimulate the demand for foreign imports, which led to the exploration of long-distance trade routes.

These changes brought a new fluidity to the rigid stratification of society, however this did not sit well with the noble elite who began to recognize that “servants are now masters and masters are servants” (Constitutional Rights Foundation). To maintain distinctions between lower and higher classes, the nobility complained that workers were greedy and lazy and attempted to pass laws to put the lower classes back in their place. For instance in 1351 the English Parliament passed the Statute of Laborers, making it a crime for workers to accept wages higher than what they received before the plague (Constitutional Rights Foundation). Concerned with high prices and fine clothes commoners were now able to afford, noblemen attempted to put in place more laws that would set prices and regulate what different classes could wear. Many wore extravagant clothing to emphasize their social status (Courie). Some workers resisted these attempts - serfs ran away refusing to work and even tried to sue their lords. Revolts erupted throughout Europe even years after the plague. An example of this is the English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 which occurred after the Parliament imposed a tax on the lower classes for the first time (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

The Black Death also brought along other long-term changes in Europe. The psychological effects of the plague were reflected through a preoccupation with death and afterlife in poetry, sculptures, and paintings. The Black Death also played a major role in the creation of new inventions such as Gutenberg’s printing press. With the lower class moving up economically more people could afford to buy books and there was a greater demand for

them. Medicine and treatment techniques became more open to scientific observation and evidence rather than religious beliefs and hospitals became more than merely places for people to die. As a result of the bubonic plague, cities recognized the importance of sanitation, garbage collection, and public health measures such as food inspection (Constitutional Rights Foundation).

## **Conclusion**

Eventually, the destruction of the Black Death began to dwindle, as people began to grow more cautious. They started to self-quarantine, stopped travelling as freely, and they even covered their mouths with fragranted handkerchiefs as an attempt to shield themselves from the plague. This reduced the risk of getting infected and transmitting the disease (“Comparing COVID-19”). These prevention measures can be seen in our modern world as well. As the outbreak of COVID-19, a virus that can spread from person to person, occurred globally, quarantine has become our current lifestyle. Similar to the prevention methods used to end the Black Death, many methods such as quarantine and avoiding densely populated areas are used to eradicate the risk of getting the virus. In addition, on the occasion that one leaves their house, they are obligated to wear a mask. Masks and face shields have become a part of our daily lives, and used as a preventive measure, similar to the handkerchiefs that were used during the plague. Furthermore, the government has encouraged us to maintain a 6 foot distance from the people around us and encourage citizens to only travel if it’s absolutely necessary.

Quarantine and the lack of social interactions have proven to have detrimental effects on young adults and children. There is a prediction that due to the lack of social interaction, a new mental health crisis might arise. There also have been discussions on which preventive measures have been the most and least effective. Some of the most effective preventive measures were concluded to be quarantine and social distancing, which is still used during this pandemic. Some of the least effective methods were based on religious beliefs, where pandemic was believed to be the punishment from God. People would go to extremes to eradicate the plague. Some of the extreme measures included taking chickens and “sucking” the plague out, while others include wearing amulets. Today, some extreme measures taken to eradicate COVID-19, include following home remedies, such as eating turmeric, in the

hopes of having a healthier immune system and lowering the risk of getting the virus. Because of preventive methods such as this, the government begins to interfere. Over the course of COVID-19, many governments across the globe have stepped up and added legislation for the safety of all people. State governments and federal governments are working hard to ensure safety for all. They created legislation to follow, as well as, guidelines to follow such as social distancing, quarantine, online school, etc.

Although the Black Death was devastating, as it took the lives of millions, the plague brought along a few benefits as well, which contributed to modern society. With a massive drop in the population, laborers were at a shortage, but their demand had not decreased. This helped the laborers as they were able to demand better working conditions and wages. In England, the wages which were 12% during the 1340s, rose to become 28% during the 1350s. As the rights of laborers began to grow, so did the economy, and it stimulated major social change. French workers in 1358 revolted in an effort to help the peasants facing bad working conditions, and many other laborers followed their steps, demanding the rights that they deserved. As a result of these improvements, the living standards increased, making life better.

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