

Prompt: Evaluate the extent to which the Black Plague impacted Europe during the period 1200-1450.

Document 1

In the town of Florence, the authorities took every precaution against the Plague. The streets were cleaned; those with the Plague were prevented from coming into the town; and prayers were said to God. But the Plague came. Both doctors and medicines seemed useless; almost everyone who got the Plague died. Those left alive behaved in different ways. Some got together in a house and cut themselves completely off from the rest of the town; they ate and drank very little and would not even talk about the Plague. Others drank a great deal, and went about in public and laughed about the Plague: they broke into houses and got drunk on the wine they found. Others carried bunches of flowers, herbs or spices and held these to their noses when they walked about: they felt that this was healthy and also it stopped them smelling the stink of the dead and dying. Others thought the best thing was to escape: they left their neighbors and families and fled to the country. People avoided each other: neighbors and families kept apart. The Plague had the effect of making brothers leave each other and husbands leave wives. Those who were dying of the Plague were left to die alone. Many died each night in the streets. Many others died in their houses and only the terrible smell of rotting bodies warned their neighbors what had happened. Then the neighbors would drag the bodies out with their own hands and leave them in the doorway. Anyone walking around in the morning could have seen more corpses than he could count. The whole town was like a graveyard. Soon huge trenches had to be dug for the bodies, which were thrown in hundreds at a time—like cargo being chucked into a ship. The bodies were covered up with a little earth and stacked up until the trench was full.

Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, author of *The Decameron*, 1348.

Document 2

At this time there was such a great shortage of priests everywhere that many churches were abandoned. None of the normal services were held. It was impossible to get a priest to come to take services unless he was paid up to £10 a year. Before the Plague, a priest would live in a village and take all the services for 3 a year—but now no one will do the job unless they are paid 20 a year. Shortly after the Plague a large number of men whose wives had died became priests, although many of them could not even write. They could read a little, but did not understand what they were reading. Source: Henry Knighton, Chronicler and Canon of St. Mary's Leicester, 1350s

Suddenly everything became very cheap, because no one was bothered about money or goods—they were all too frightened of dying . . . Sheep and oxen strayed through the fields and among the crops, because there was no one to drive them away, or collect them together. These animals mostly died in ditches, or by getting tangled up in the hedges; there was no one to look after them and the lords of the manor did not know what to do . . . Lords who had lent land in return for yearly labor service were forced to change these services. They either had to let the serfs off the services, or else accept money instead. Unless they did this the serfs ran away and left their houses and the land to go to ruin. The laborers were so proud and hostile that they took no notice of the King's law. If anyone wanted to employ laborers, he had to pay them what they asked—or lose his fruit and crops.

Source: Henry Knighton, Chronicler and Canon of St. Mary's Leicester, 1350s.

“No citizen or resident of Pistoia shall dare or presume to go to Pisa or Lucca; and no one shall come to Pistoia from those places; penalty 500 pence. No one shall dare or presume to bring to Pistoia any old linen or woolen clothes, penalty 200 pence, and the cloth to be burnt in the public piazza of Pistoia by the official who discovered it.

The bodies of the dead shall not be removed from the place of death until they have been enclosed in a wooden box, and the lid of planks nailed down so that no stench can escape: penalty 50 pence to be paid by the heirs of the deceased. To avoid the foul stench which comes from dead bodies, each grave shall be dug two and a half arms-length deep.

Any person attending a funeral shall not accompany the corpse or its kinsmen further than the door of the church where the burial is to take place, or go back to the house where the deceased lived. When someone dies, no one shall dare or presume to give or send any gift to the house of the deceased....

So that the living are not made ill by rotten and corrupt food, no butcher or retailer of meat shall dare or presume to hang up meat, or keep and sell meat hung up in their storehouse or over their counter. To avoid harm to men by stink and corruption, there shall in future be no tanning of skins within the city walls of Pistoia.

- *Ordinances against the Spread of Plague, Pistoia (a northern Italian city), 1348*

Document 4

A. Luders et al. London

Since a great part of the population, and especially workers and employees, has now died in this pestilence many people, observing the needs of masters and the shortage of employees, are refusing to work unless they are paid an excessive salary. Others prefer to beg in idleness rather than work for their living. Mindful of the serious inconvenience likely to arise from this shortage, especially of agricultural labourers, we have discussed and considered the matter with our... nobles and other learned men and, with their unanimous advice, we have ordained that every man or woman in our realm of England, whether free or unfree, who is physically fit and below the age of sixty, not living by trade or by exercising a particular craft, and not having private means or land of their own upon which they need to work, and not working for someone else, shall, if offered employment consonant with their status, be obliged to accept the employment offered, and they should be paid only in the fees, liveries, payments or salaries, which were usually paid in the part of the country where they are working in the 20th year of our reign [1346] or in some other appropriate year five or six years ago. Lords should have first claim on the services of their villeins or tenants, although they should retain only as many as the need and no more.

Source: Herman Gigas, Franciscan friar (priest) from Franconia, Germany, 1349

Document 5

In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world that in the opinion of well-informed men scarcely a tenth of mankind survived. The victims did not linger long, but died on the second or third day. The plague raged so fiercely that many cities and towns were entirely emptied of people. In the cities of Bologna, Venice, Montpellier, Avignon, Marseilles, and Toulouse alike, a thousand people died in one day, and it still rages in France Normandy, England and Ireland. Some say that it was brought about by the corruption of the air; others that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this wickedness, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. ... Throughout Germany, in all but a few places, they were burnt. ... This action was taken against the Jews in 1349, and it still continues unabated, for in a number of regions many people, noble and humble alike, have laid plans against them and their defenders which they will never abandon until the whole Jewish race has been destroyed.

Source: Record from the court of an English manor, 1351

Document 6

As a result of a plea from various unfree tenants on various manors of the Lord John de Vere, Earl of Oxford, concerning the waiving of part of the labour services and customs which they used to perform before the pestilence, and which now (as everyone knows) they lack the power to perform in their entirety, the said earl is ... authorizing me, ... to use my discretion in coming to an agreement with all the unfree tenants wherever it seemed to me that the lord's interests made it necessary, and ..., to release part of the works and customs which they used to perform before the pestilence. And since I have been given to understand by the earl's unfree tenants on his manor... that they cannot hold their land by performing all the works and customs which they used to perform before the pestilence, as has been very clearly demonstrated...

At this court I have granted to all the unfree tenants who hold 15 acreware tenements in the said manor that a third part of their customary ploughing works and all their carrying services shall be waived annually during the said term.

Document 7

Source: Regulations issued by the Duke of Milan, 1374 CE.

Wishing as far as we can, to preserve our subjects from contagious illness, we have made certain decrees which we send to you inclosed in this...

To the noble man. We wish that each person who displays a swelling or tumor shall immediately leave the city, castle or town where he is and take to the open country, living either in huts or in the woods, until he either dies or recovers.

Item, those in attendance upon someone who died shall wait ten days before returning to human society.

Item, parish priests shall examine the sick to see what the illness is, and shall immediately notify the designated searchers under pain of being burnt alive.

Item, the goods of anyone who carries the epidemic from another place shall likewise be but to the use of the lord's treasury, and no restitution shall be made.

Item, under pain of forfeiture and death no one shall enter service from attending upon the sick, except above.