The Black Death: How Different Were Christian and Muslim Responses?

A Document Based Question (DBQ)
World History
TEACHER DOCUMENT LIST (LV)

There are 17 documents in the Longer Version of this DBQ. Besides four dealing with context, the remaining documents are organized around causes, treatment of the dead, and actions by the living. Below is the author's picture of this organization. Students may simply organize the documents around Christian responses and Muslim responses. Students are provided with the same document list not divided into categories.

Context

Document A: Paths of the Black Death (map)
Document B: Areas of Concentration (map)
Document C: Statistics of the Dead (chart)
Document D: Descriptions from Italy and Syria

Causes

Document E: The Role of God
Document F: Non-Religious Causes and Preventions

Treatment of the Dead

Document G: Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron
Document H: The Sisters of Hotel Dieu
Document I: “The martyrs and those who die in their beds”
Document J: The Dead of Cairo and Death-Related Wages

Behavior of the Living

Document K: William Dene, “The people ... became more depraved”
Document L: Ibn Taghri Birdi, “The Mosque was thrown into confusion”
Document M: The Flagellants
Document N: Anti-Semitism
Document O: The Pope Responds
Document P: Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa
Document Q: Michael Dols, The Black Death in the Middle East
STUDENT GUIDE SHEET

The Black Death: How Different Were Christian and Muslim Responses?

Directions: In the mid-14th century the plague spread around the world from China to Europe. Known today as the Black Death, it was responsible for the deaths of approximately one-third of the population of Europe and the Middle East. How people responded to this calamity seems to have been influenced by their religion and worldview. This document based exercise asks you to determine how Christian and Muslim responses to the Black Death differed.

We suggest you proceed in the following way:

1. Read the Background Essay. It gives an overview of the Black Death, Christianity, and Islam.
2. Quickly skim through the documents to get a sense of what they are about.
3. Read the documents slowly. For each, use the margins or a Document Analysis Sheet to record:
   a. What or who is the source? Is it primary or secondary?
   b. What is the main idea (or ideas) in the document?
4. Organize the documents into analytical categories. These categories might be: general context, causes and explanations, treatment of the dead, and responses by the living. Or, you may want to simply have two categories, Muslim responses and Christian responses.
5. Using evidence from the documents, generalize as to just how different Christian and Muslim responses were from each other.

The Documents:

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Document B: Areas of Concentration (map)
Document C: Statistics of the Dead (chart)
Document D: Descriptions from Italy and Syria
Document E: The Role of God
Document F: Non-Religious Causes and Preventions
Document G: Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron
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Teacher Document Notes – Longer Version (LV)

Document A: Paths of the Black Death (map)

Content Notes:
- This document overlaps with the background reading and provides a useful context for the student. Students can consult this document for both its chronological information and its geographical information. The main idea of this document is that the plague ravaged much of Asia, Europe, and North Africa, and that between 1345 and 1350 it spread quickly following trade routes.
- Students may notice while reading one or two subsequent documents that they do not match with the exact time period of the Black Death; in those instances the documents refer to a later outbreak of the plague.

Teaching Tips:
- Ask students to recall from the Background Essay what role rats and parasitic fleas had in carrying the plague from place to place. (Rats carried infected fleas which, when the rat died, could jump onto a human.) Did rats have to walk from one population center to another or might they have hitched a ride? On what? (The rats frequently traveled by ship hiding in grain bins and other cargo holds. This is why many port cities came to quarantine ships and not let sailors and passengers get off.)
- Ask students to analyze:
  
  1. the source of the plague (out of central Asia)
  2. how the Black Death got from Sarai [modern-day Volgograd] to Paris (overland to Kaffa in the Crimea > by ship through the Black Sea and the Dardanelles > continuing by ship through the Mediterranean Sea to Messina, Sicily > by ship to Marseilles, France > overland to Paris)
  3. the speed of its spread from Sarai north of the Caspian Sea to Paris (just two to three years)

- It is interesting to speculate why the plague did not spread to other parts of the world. What geographical barriers might have kept the plague out of West Africa? (the Sahara Desert) the Western Hemisphere? (the Atlantic Ocean)

- Ask students how a map like this helps them to answer the analytical question. Is it irrelevant? Does it provide context and just what does that mean? (Context is the setting. It includes time, place, surrounding events, general beliefs. Context is often essential to understanding a particular event or set of cultural and religious behaviors. In papers it can contribute to meaty introductory paragraphs. This map shows that both Christian Europe and Muslim North Africa and Damascus were hit by the plague at about the same time.)
Document B: Areas of Concentration (map)

Content Notes:
- This map leaves three overall impressions:
  1. the Black Death scoured most of Europe and the north coast of Africa;
  2. it spread quickly;
  3. there were a few pockets that escaped.

Teaching Tips:
- Ask students what factual statements they can make about the Black Death based upon this map:
  (These statements might include the following):
  1. It came out of the east near the Black Sea in 1346.
  2. In 1347 it overtook seven cities shown on the map – Kaffa in the Crimea, Constantinople in modern-day Turkey, Damascus in modern-day Syria, Alexandria in Egypt, Tunis in modern-day Tunisia, Palermo in Sicily, and Marseille in France.
  3. The plague seems to have moved from east to west and then south to north.
  4. No part of coastal Europe or north Africa appears to have been untouched.
  5. There were a few inland pockets in Europe that apparently escaped the plague.
  6. The African interior seems to have escaped.)
- Ask students to speculate on why each of the untouched areas might have escaped the plague:
  (African interior: the Sahara Desert discouraged the movement of people and therefore the move-ment of rats and lice. The Pyrenees may well have blocked the spread of plague in the region between Spain and France. The Black Forest in southwestern Germany may have discouraged travel and therefore plague.)
Document C: Statistics of the Dead (chart)

Content Notes:
- Historian Philip Ziegler maintains that European population figures from the 14th century are not very accurate but English statistics are deemed to be close. Michael Dols acknowledges that the Near East figures are very approximate as the pre-plague Egyptian number suggests.
- As a general rule mortality rates were higher in the cities than in the countryside both in Europe and in the Near East. European monastic enclaves that had no contact with the outside world tended to fare well. Desert Bedouins who remained away from Near Eastern cities also escaped the plague's wrath.

Teaching Tips:
- Ask students if there is anything about the statistics that suggests the numbers are unsure. (The Egyptian population range of 4 to 8 million)
- Is there anything about the statistics that suggests they are reliable? (Yes. Mortality rates separately arrived at for Europe, England, Syria, and Egypt all hover around 33%)
- How do students explain the fact that English monks in monasteries and English parish priests who worked out and about with the general population both had death rates higher than the average? (Hypothesis: Cloistered monks were more susceptible to an infectious contagion once the plague was carried into the monastery. Parish priests were susceptible to the plague if they ministered to the sick and the plague was contagious.)
- Ask students to count off by threes. Ask every number three to lie dead on the floor. Question: If this scene were repeated throughout the school, the town, the state, the country, the world, what would be the consequences? Ask students if there is anything in their religious traditions or beliefs that would help them get through a disease that killed one third of the population.
- Is there anything in this statistical document that helps answer the analytical question? (The document, like the maps, is a context document. It does tell us that the mortality rates in the Christian and Muslim areas were about the same. This is significant because if we later learn there are differences in response between Christians and Muslims, we will know that it was not because of different degrees of severity of the disease.)
The Mortality in Siena (Agnolo di Tura)

Content Notes:
- The purpose of this document is to provide the student with a description of the Black Death in a predominantly Christian country. The chronicler makes some key points and reveals some noteworthy attitudes:
  1. In the second and third sentence, Agnolo di Tura describes the survivors as being in a state of shock, "stupified by seeing the pain."
  2. He describes the indiscriminate nature of the disease, the symptoms, and how quickly people died. The symptoms he describes are classic bubonic plague symptoms.
  3. Di Tura points out that the plague is contagious and "seemed to strike through breath and sight." Di Tura's belief that the plague was contagious is further implied when he says "none could be found to bury the dead for money..." This is important. Most Christians believed that the plague was contagious, whereas many Muslims were taught that the plague was sent by God, and so it was blasphemous to believe it was a contagion. (See Document E.)
  4. Di Tura describes the breakdown of Catholic ritual. This will become important when compared to the preoccupation with getting the service right in the Muslim world. (See Document L.)
  5. He describes a lack of respect for the dead. This will become important when compared with the discussion of martyrdom for Muslim plague victims in Document I.
  6. He alludes to the futility of the situation and a belief in "the end of the world." This feeling of millennialism was common during the Black Death in Europe. Many Europeans, including the flagellants, preached about the end of the world during the Black Death. However, this feeling was not as common in the Middle East.

Teaching Tips:
- Ask students to circle each of the adjectives that the author uses. (Cruel, horrible, pitiless, stupefied, awful) These adjectives underscore the human aspect of this disaster and give the reader a sense of the futility that di Tura felt.
- After reading this document it would be interesting to ask students to imagine how they would have reacted if they were Agnolo di Tura. After burying five children and seeing awful death all around, would they believe it was the end of the world? Would they abandon religious ritual?
- Ask students to identify what evidence there is that the author believes the plague is contagious. (See Content Notes.)

The Malady in Damascus (al-Maqrizi)

Content Notes:
- This document partners with the di Tura document as a Muslim description of the plague.
- The student will notice some similarities with di Tura's account (buboes under the arms), and also some differences (swelling behind ears, spitting of blood). While di Tura describes classic bubonic plague symptoms, al-Maqrizi describes pneumonic and pneumonic plague (spitting blood is a symptom of pneumonic plague). Pneumonic plague was actually faster working and more deadly than bubonic plague.

Teaching Tips:
- Encourage students to consider the di Tura and al-Maqrizi documents together. One is a description of the plague in Siena, Italy, while the other is a description of the plague in Damascus, Syria. Have students identify similarities and differences. Was this the same plague, or was it a different strain of disease? (The plague type that al-Maqrizi was describing – pneumonic – was even worse than the bubonic described by di Tura.)
- Ask if, at this point, there seems to be a difference in the way that the Muslims in Damascus and the Christians in Siena responded to the plague. (There really doesn't seem to be a difference as both were terrified.)
- Do we learn as much from al-Maqrizi about the Muslim response to the plague as we learn from di Tura about the Christian response? (We learn more from the di Tura document.)
Document E: The Role of God

Gabriele de Mussis: “I am overwhelmed”

Content Notes:
• The de Mussis and al-Manbijj documents provide a striking contrast between how one Christian and one Muslim explain why there is a plague.
• The key sentence in the de Mussis document is, “We know that whatever we suffer is the just reward of our sins.” This underscores the predominant Christian belief that the plague came from God as a punishment. The underlying belief here is that the people brought the plague upon themselves — it was their own fault. This belief led many Christians to follow the advice given by de Mussis and “embrace acts of penance.”
• It is important to note that even though this was the predominant belief in Christianity, not all Christians felt this way about the plague. Later documents will show that some Christians did not “embrace acts of penance” and instead did the exact opposite, engaging in hedonistic acts. Most of the evidence suggests that Christians did believe that their sins brought the plague, but many of them saw acts of penance as futile. They believed that God was punishing the people indiscriminately, and so it did not matter that some were repenting for their sins.
• Among many of the educated of Europe, even among some Catholic Church officials, the Black Death was seen as nothing other than a disease. However, the vast majority of Europeans in the mid-1300s were not educated.

Teaching Tips:
• Ask students to identify who de Mussis believes is responsible for the plague. Some might argue that he believed that God was responsible because of the phrase, “the Almighty strikes repeatedly.” However, it becomes clearer that de Mussis places the ultimate responsibility of the plague on the sins of the people.
• This is a good time to introduce the idea of underlying cause versus secondary cause. Human sin might cause God to unleash the plague (primary or underlying) but once unleashed, the plague might spread through human to human contact (secondary).
• A discussion could arise about explaining tragedies. Ask students if they blame God when bad things happen? Do they blame science? Do they blame the sins of people or do they have other explanations? Do their beliefs seem to be based on reason or faith?

Muhammad al-Manbijji: Report of the Plague

Content Notes:
• Students will notice that this document was written in 1364, sixteen years following the Black Death. The note explains that this document was written during the first reappearance of the plague in Syria.
• The key to the document is the predominant Muslim belief that the plague was a “divine act.” This is not different from the predominant Christian belief. However, there was a difference about what should be done about it. Christians believed that acts of penance could assuage the plague while conservative Muslim clerics taught that for devout Muslims, the plague is a “blessing from God” and therefore, “prayer for lifting the epidemic is abhorrent.” It is interesting to note that these same clerics taught that for Muslims who are not devout or for members of other religions, the plague was a punishment.
• This belief that the plague is a blessing for devout Muslims underscores many Muslim reactions to the plague. For instance, Muslims were taught not to flee plague-stricken areas. The logic behind this belief is that since the plague is divine, God can find you anywhere, and besides, the plague is a blessing from God, so why would you want to flee? Though this was the predominant belief, not all Muslims believed it, and so some Muslims attempted to flee the plague.
• Since most Muslims held the belief that the plague was divine and a blessing, they came to accept it much more easily than Christians.

Teaching Tips:
• Ask students if the document suggests that all Muslims devoutly accepted the plague. (No. The conservative clerics were teaching it, but not all Muslims could accept such tragedy so easily. However, this belief did help shape the way that Muslims responded to the plague.)
• Have students compare and contrast de Mussis and al-Manbijji. What are the similarities? (Both believed that the plague was a divine act.) What are the differences? (Christians believed that acts of penance could assuage the plague, while Muslims were taught to accept it as a blessing.) Ask students how these beliefs could explain differences in Christian and Muslim responses to the plague. (See last Content Note above.)
Document F: Non-Religious Causes and Preventions

Content Notes:
• In both Europe and the Middle East there was widespread belief that the plague was attributable to God, either as a punishment or, in conservative Muslim circles, as a gateway to martyrdom. However, there were also many secondary explanations. Not suspecting the lice-rat-human connection, many believed that foul air (miasma) was the delivery agent of the plague. The source of this foul air was open to much speculation. It is interesting that a connection was made by Muslim chroniclers between the Mongol siege at Kafka on the Crimea and miasma. Historians now believe that the Mongols were indeed the carriers of plague from Central Asia to Europe. The transmission, however, wasn’t through the air but by inhabitants fleeing the Crimea and seeking refuge at various Mediterranean ports.
• It was common in both Europe and the Near East to look to the stars in catastrophic times. It wasn’t so much that planetary conjunctions or shooting stars (meteorites) caused the Black Death; rather they were harbingers of things to come.

Teaching Tips:
• Examine the non-religious cause lists. Comparing Europe and the Near East, what stands out, the similarities or the differences? (Miasma, the stars, and excessive behavior appear in both lists.)
• Examine the prevention lists. Do similarities or differences stand out? Is there a common human quality that runs through both lists? (Yes.) What is that quality? (They both show a rather desperate casting about for escape from a terrible disease that was difficult to understand. Both Christians and Muslims were ready to try just about anything.)
• Is there evidence in this document that many Muslims were not entirely listening to conservative scholars like al-Manbiji (Document E)? (Yes. The long list of preventives suggests many Muslims weren’t content to simply accept the plague as a blessing from God.)
**Documents G: Giovanni Boccaccio, The Decameron**

**Content Notes:**
- Two themes dominate this document: selfishness and lack of honor or care for the dead. The first theme arises with the belief that the plague is contagious while the other theme can either be seen as a result of the selfishness (Why should I care for the dead if I could catch the plague from them?), or a general feeling of futility (What's the point of caring for the dead when there are just too many of them and I might die tomorrow anyway?).
- The dominant Christian belief that the plague is contagious is plainly stated in this document.
- This document also points out that many Christian responses to the plague tended to be individual rather than communal in nature. This tended to be true during the Black Death as Christians attempted to care for the dead but became either overwhelmed or scared for their own lives. Thus, the ending phrase from Boccaccio, "men who died were shown no more concern than dead goats today."

**Teaching Tips:**
- Ask students why the dead “were shown no more concern than dead goats today”? (The belief in a contagion or the futility of the situation). Continue the discussion about whether the actions of the living were wise, selfish, just, or unjust.
- Ask students if Christians tried to keep religious rituals going. (Priests attempted to keep up with Church rituals but became overwhelmed by the dead and it simply became unfeasible. This is a key point when compared with Muslim responses that will arise in later documents.)
- Ask students to consult the mortality statistics in Document C regarding English parish priests. What percentage of these priests died during the plague? (45%) Is this statistic at all relevant to how European Christians treated the dead? (It might explain why the dead got less attention as the plague wore on. It also might dispute the impression given by Boccaccio that priests were uncaring. Many priests may have lost their lives caring for the sick. We just don’t know from these documents.)

**Document H: The Sisters of Hotel Dieu**

**Content Notes:**
- Because of Boccaccio’s fame as a leading Italian Renaissance writer, his introductory pages to The Decameron may be given more credence as an accurate portrayal of plague conditions in Florence than they deserve. He paints a dark picture, especially of the lack of regard for plague victims. This testimonial by Jean de Venette, coupled with the mortality rates of English parish priests in Document C, suggests that not all Christians regarded the plague dead as dead goats.

**Teaching Tips:**
- Ask students to reread the last line in the Boccaccio paragraph from The Decameron, Document G. Then ask if Document H supports or contradicts Boccaccio’s description of how Christians treated the plague dead. (Contradicts) What phrases from de Venette are evidence of this? (“carried bodies in carts with great devotion,” “not fearing to die,” “nursed in sweetness and humility”)
- Ask students how they deal with conflicting evidence. Is one of the sources necessarily wrong? (No. Conditions in Florence, Italy may have been different from conditions and responses in Paris, France.) How many sources are needed to firm up a generalization? (To a point, the more the better. Certainly two sources do not an accurate generalization make.) Boccaccio is writing a novel; de Venette is not. Does this make a difference?
Document I: “The martyrs and those who die in their beds…”

Content Notes:
- Ibn Abi Hajalah was an eyewitness to the Black Death in Damascus.
- How one dies is almost as important as how one lives in fundamentalist Islam. To die a martyr is the ultimate death in the eyes of devout Muslims. In light of this, Muslims began to ask how plague victims should be viewed. Muslim clerics agreed that plague victims should be seen as martyrs. The logic behind this is that since the plague is a divine blessing from Allah (for the devout Muslim victims), then their deaths must be highly regarded.
- Have the students compare the idea of martyrdom with Document G (Christians showing no more concern for the dead than dead goats). Challenge students to come up with reasons why Muslims viewed the dead as martyrs and why some Christians in Florence did not honor their dead. (Perhaps the answer to this question goes back to how the two religions view the plague – Christians as a punishment from God and Muslims as a blessing from God.)
- If one is seeking to compare and contrast Christian and Muslim responses to the dead, is it fair to compare *The Decameron* (Document G) with Hajalah (Document I)? (As students saw in the de Venette document, *The Decameron* may not be representative of the Christian response. It would make perfect sense for a student to argue at this point that more evidence from both Europe and the Near East is needed.)

Teaching Tips:
- Since the key to this document is that devout Muslim plague victims are seen as martyrs, it is imperative that students understand the meaning of martyrdom in fundamentalist Islam. After defining the word, ask students to come up with famous figures from history they would consider martyrs. (Christi, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.) Are these people generally remembered in a positive or a negative way?

Document J: The Dead of Cairo and Death-Related Wages

Content Notes:
- The paragraph from historian Michael Dols was part of his attempt to calculate the number of plague victims in Cairo. One way that Cairo dead can be estimated is by counts that were made at the city gates as corpses were being carried out for burial beyond the city walls. This description which compares Cairo to Boccaccio’s Florence suggests that treatment of the dead may not have been all that different in Cairo.
- The purpose of including the wages from the environs of Cairo and Aleppo, Syria, is to provide some measure of how the Islamic world valued caring for the plague dead.
- Does the Dols paragraph square with Document I? I.e. can you bury people in mass graves and still regard them as martyrs?
- What does the wage information tell us about how Muslims regarded the plague dead? (If wages are a measure of regard, the plague dead were quite highly valued. The prayer reader’s wage is most telling; it equalled about three times the daily wages of a groom, and this for only one reading.)
- Create a continuum with “like goats” at one end and “as martyrs” at the other end. Have students read Documents G, H, I, and J ask where on the continuum they would place European Christians and Near East Muslims. Have them defend their placements. (The evidence is mixed enough that students will probably not all agree on placement. This is probably as it should be. History often unveils itself in shades of grey.)

Teaching Tips:
- Ask students if their only evidence was the Michael Dols paragraph, what conclusion would they draw about Muslim treatment of the plague dead?