

Background to the Renaissance

When Plague Strikes

Starting around the 1100's, people in Europe started to open up trade routes with other parts of the world. Traders like Marco Polo started to travel as far as India and China, and bring back spices and other goods from new parts of the world. One of the most famous trade routes was called the silk road. These trade routes gave Europeans brand new goods, and started to change their lives, especially of the rich.



Cities were overrun with dead bodies during the Black Death.

Unfortunately, there was a secret hitchhiker that also started to come back on the wagons of the traders: the bubonic plague. The bubonic plague is a bacterial infection that is spread by fleas on rats. The plague does not affect the rats, but is deadly to human beings. From 1340-1400 A.D., an epidemic known as the “Black



Rats and Fleas were carriers of disease. The Bubonic Plague only impacted humans, not the rats or fleas. Many diseases are spread by animals who are immune to it.

Death” wiped out people all across Europe. About one of every three (1/3) people in Europe died from this disease. Smaller outbreaks of the plague would continue to affect the world until the invention of antibiotics, although the easiest way to prevent the disease was simply to follow basic hygiene practices.

Nursery Rhyme History

Did you know that many of the nursery rhymes that you've learned as a child were actually used to teach children about history? A perfect example is the rhyme, “Ring Around the Rosey.”

Ring around the Rosey

Sores from the flea bites are the first sign of the Bubonic Plague. People develop red rings around the sore.

Pocket full of Posey

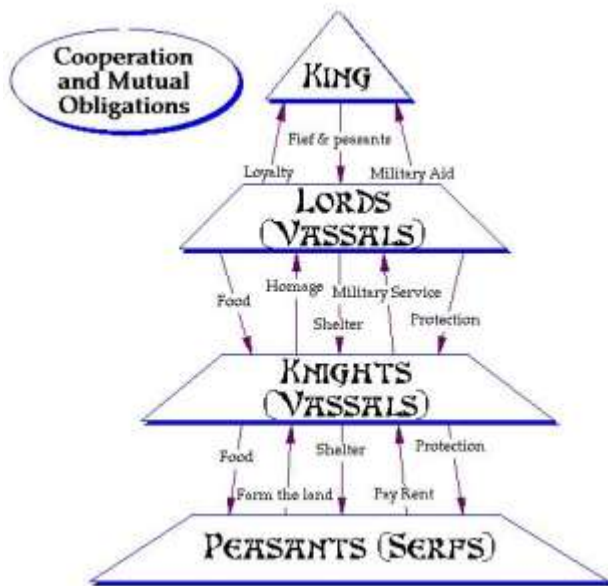
Doctors didn't know what was causing the people getting sick. They literally walked around with flowers so they wouldn't smell the disease, thinking that might keep them safe.

Ashes, Ashes, we all fall down.

Almost every European at this time belonged to the Catholic Church. The Church taught at this time that in order to be raised from the dead and go to heaven at the end of time, you needed to be buried. So many people died, that they couldn't bury all of the people, so they burned them. This was a really big deal.

Feudalism

During the time of the Middle Ages (1000-1400 A.D.), the main government system was feudalism. Do you remember all of the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? They are an example of the feudal system. Basically, feudalism was a system where most people in Europe did not own any land. They were called serfs or peasants. In the Feudal system, these people lived in a house owned by a local lord. They worked and grew crops on his land, and got to keep a



small portion of the food or goods that were produced by his land. Obviously, this system worked out very well for the lord and lady who owned the land, because they made money from their land and didn't even have to pay the people who worked for them.

During this time, there may have been a king, but countries weren't very clearly defined. Even more important than countries were groups of lords who were willing to work together. There was almost no middle class during this time; you were either very rich, or very poor. Lords were also the knights, who rode horses and wore suits of armor. Gunpowder (and therefore guns) had not yet been used much in Europe, so the best way to make sure that you were more powerful than your enemy was to put on 80 pounds of metal, and ride a horse. Most soldiers had very little armor, and would either use a crude bow, or sharpened stick or small sword to fight. Knights on their horses could move fast, and were hard to injure, making them the "tanks" of their time. Since they owned the land and the castles and could fight better, there was almost nothing peasants could do to challenge the lord's power.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What were the positives and negatives of trading with China and India?
2. What did peasants get from the feudal system, and why didn't they demand more rights?

Write about it. Write your own nursery rhyme that shows how we would deal with diseases today. Make sure your rhyme describes the symptoms, treatment/prevention, and results.