

From: *The Penguin History of the World*, J.M. Roberts (1990) pp. 483-4.

(Setting: Europe, 14th century)

It is very difficult to generalize but about one thing there is no doubt: a great and cumulative setback occurred in the fourteenth century. There was a sudden rise in mortality, not occurring everywhere at the same time, but notable in many places after a series of bad harvests round about 1320. This started a slow decline of population which suddenly became a disaster with the onset of attacks of epidemic disease which are often called by the name of one of them, the 'Black Death' of 1348-50 and the worst single attack. It was of bubonic plague, but no doubt it masked many other killing diseases which swept Europe with it and in its wake. Europeans died of typhus, influenza and smallpox, too, and all of them contributed to a great demographic disaster. In some areas a half or a third of the population may have died; over Europe as a whole the total loss has been calculated as a quarter. A papal enquiry put the figure at more than forty million. Toulouse was a city of 30 000 in 1335 and a century later only 8000 lived there; once 1400 died in three days at Avignon.

There was no universal pattern of disaster, but everywhere Europeans shuddered under these blows. In the most extreme cases a kind of collective madness seized men. Pogroms of Jews were a common expression of a search for scapegoats or those guilty of spreading the plague; the burning of witches and heretics was another. The **European psyche bore a scar for the rest of the Middle Ages**, which were haunted by the imagery of death and damnation in painting, carving and literature. The fragility of settled order illustrated the precariousness of the balance of food and population. **When disease killed enough people, agricultural production would collapse; then the inhabitants of the towns would die of famine if they were not already dying of plague.** Probably a plateau of productivity had already been reached by about 1300. Both available techniques and easily accessible new land for cultivation had reached a limit and some have seen signs of population pressure treading close upon resources even by that date. **From this flowed the huge setback of the fourteenth century and then the next century's slow recovery.**