**The Black Death: The Medieval Plague Pandemic Through the Eyes of Ibn Battuta**

0.0 – Module Lesson Plan

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H/21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online, educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H/21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/>.

**Module Overview**

This module explores the evidence for what is regarded as the largest, or certainly the most severe, pandemic in human history: the Black Death. This was a plague pandemic that struck parts of Eurasia and Africa in the late Middle Ages. In some places, it killed anywhere between 40-60% of the population. The episode we call “the Black Death” that struck in the late 1340s, although cataclysmically severe, was by no means unique. Rather, it was part of a new disease regime that “seeded” the disease of plague across wide regions. The Black Death was preceded by smaller regional outbreaks, starting in the 13th century, and it was followed by 400-500 years of repeated plague outbreaks, all of which (the evidence suggests) were caused by genetic descendants of the original 13th century strains that emerged from the so-called “Big Bang” of plague proliferation. This larger period is known as the Second Plague Pandemic, and explaining its scope and its causes is currently one of the major tasks for those working in the History of Medicine.

Through four (or six) class meetings, in conjunction with specially prepared advance readings, this module investigates how historians now understand the Second Plague Pandemic in regard to its biological cause, and the larger environmental and cultural circumstances that made it happen. Modern scientific techniques have been able to confirm that a bacterium, called *Yersinia pestis* can be identified as the microbial cause of the pandemic. What allows a single-celled microbe to take over nearly half the planet? And how did the societies affected by this (to them) invisible threat react to the unthinkable calamity they were witnessing as they saw the massive toll of periodic outbreaks?

Looking at the late medieval pandemic from this double perspective—the seen and the unseen—informs our choice of the Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battuta (b. 1304, d. 1368/1369), as our guide. Ibn Battuta was perhaps the most widely traveled individual of his age. He was traveling right at the time of the Black Death. By comparing what he saw and reported against the “map” of the pandemic as we can now reconstruct it, we begin to learn why plague—which is really a rodent disease that only intermittently affects humans—was such an insidious and lethal force in this period.

At the start of the module, you will be introduced not only to our “guide,” Ibn Battuta, but also to several key concepts that will help us *think big* like any pandemic (by definition) forces us to do. (“Pandemic” literally means “all people,” *pan + demos,* an event that encompasses everyone at once). The topic of the Black Death is unusual as a historical phenomenon because we are looking not only at what humans did, but also at what an invisible microbe—a bacterium—was able to do across a wide geographic expanse. Our evidence will therefore be not just written texts (describing events as human participants viewed them) but also material remains of the crisis, both genetic and archeological.

We can think of plague’s biology as its “personality”: it likes certain environments; it behaves in certain ways. From that microscopic level, we’ll move up to the field of global history. Here, our central concept will be “thinking at scale.” “Thinking at scale” means that we learn how to approach different questions at the “scale” and with the methods they are best suited for. For the human experience, written records produced during the time we are studying are our best, most immediate source. For microbes, we have to look at things from a microscopic level, and here we need the aid of the biological sciences. For material remains, we have to learn from archeologists. This coalition of investigative methods will lay the conceptual groundwork for the module.

Our ultimate goal is to understand:

1. How a catastrophe of such magnitude could have happened when and how it did, and
2. How and why people responded to it the ways that they did

By the end of the module, students will:

* Be able to define the “Black Death” as traditionally understood and explain why the concept of the Second Plague Pandemic better fits with the way historians and scientists now understand the changed disease environment of the late Middle Ages.
* Understand why science and archeology can be crucial contributors to the historical reconstruction of pandemics, alongside written documentary sources
* Be able to articulate the ethical concerns that should be considered when investigating the histories of epidemics and disease
* Document why *historical context* (including religious traditions) matters in understanding the persecution of minority groups in pandemics

**Module Map**

**Lesson 1:** **Ibn Battuta’s world**

* Define and discuss what “pandemics” are as distinct historical phenomena
* Itemize the common elements of the story of the Black Death and consider why the traditional narrative might be incomplete
* Review the kinds of sources that allow us to construct pandemic histories
* Survey the chief characteristics of plague as a disease and why it should be treated as a historical actor in its own right

**Lesson 2:** **What Ibn Battuta saw: Damascus and Cairo**

* Establish the geographic route and timing of Ibn Battuta’s travels through the Mongol Empire
* Assess how Ibn Battuta acquired knowledge about the ongoing pandemic
* Survey evidence of plague’s epidemiological path through the eastern Mediterranean and its effects on the city of Cairo, Egypt
* Discuss the ethical considerations needed to examine death, disease, and population ancestries
* Explore how and why people in the Islamic world reacted to pandemic in the ways that they did

**Lesson 3:** **What Ibn Battuta didn’t see: plague’s emergence and focalizations**

* Review the new narrative of plague in the late Middle Ages that allows for a larger geography and longer chronology of *Yersinia pestis*’s spread within the context of the Mongol Empire, leading up to the Great Mortality of the 1340s
* Understand phylogenetic trees, and explain what information evolutionary analysis can yield on the developing pandemic
* Explain why the routes plague took are now being challenged by an expanded chronology and geography of the Second Plague Pandemic
* Explain why the East Smithfield Black Death Cemetery in London holds a special place in plague historiography and science

**Lesson 4: Accusation and persecution: the fate of Europe’s minority populations**

* Examine patterns in archaeological evidence from the outbreak of the Black Death in Europe
* Assess and map the evidence for accusations and violence against minority communities in late medieval Europe
* Examine the possible role of plague outbreaks in the genesis of “first-wave” well-poisoning accusations in the 1320s
* Explain why responses to the Second Plague Pandemic in certain areas of Europe were so distinct from responses to this crisis elsewhere