Medieval Europe: Crash Course European History #1

Crash Course: European History
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Hello and welcome to Crash Course European history, I'm John Green, and as you may know medieval Europe has a terrible reputation.

We often hear that it was disease and famine-ridden (which it was). Children were supposedly forced to marry at six or eight or ten years old, which was not common, although people did start marrying younger, in part because they were also dying younger.

We hear that knights in shining armor slaughtered wantonly, albeit with good manners called chivalry, which is partly true, although the chivalric code was in decline. And we also hear that it wasn't safe to drink the water, so they drank beer exclusively, which more on that in a moment. But yeah, today we're turning our attention to these so-called "Middle Ages." But right, so about beer.

In those days, people did drink beer and ale. The were nutritious (and still are), but they also drank other things: milk, other beverages, and especially water. There were wells with safe and delicious drinking water.

Still, it's true that a lot of bad things did happen in the 14th and 15th centuries: The Black Death, the Great Schism in the Catholic Church, and the Hundred Years War. Also, in the 14th century, the Little Ice Age began, which meant cooler temperatures and declining harvests, and that contributed to stunting and starvation. But let's begin with the Black Death, a huge pandemic of a disease called Bubonic Plague, which spread to Europe from Asia.

Many experts believe the plague originated in Tibet as a localized epidemic but then spread carried by rats and mice and fleas. And those animals were able to travel widely because humans were traveling, and the fleas and rats hitched rides with us, so in that sense, the plague was a product of growing human interconnectedness. Bubonic plague is a horrible disease.

After infection with the bacterium Yersinia Pestis, lymph nodes swell and sometimes burst; victims often get high fevers and vomit blood; gangrene can cause extremities and facial features to turn black with necrosis, hence "the Black Death"; and depending on the strain, somewhere between 50 and 60 percent of people infected died. These days, bubonic plague is treatable by antibiotics, But such treatments have only been around for a few decades. As recently as the 20th century, outbreaks in India and China killed more than 12 million people.

But the 14th century's Black Death was even worse. Around 25 million people had died in Asia by the time the plague reached Constantinople in 1347, and within four years, a staggering number of Europeans had died from it, often within two days of becoming infected. People faced a heartbreaking decision: whether to risk caring for their ailing loved ones, or leave them to die alone in the hopes of avoiding infection.

Some areas lost up to 80 percent of their population. The latest research claims that in Europe as a whole, around half of all people died. Death haunted every moment.

It's difficult to grasp just how profound the Black Death was, but imagine losing half of your community in a few years to a poorly understood disease. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote, "Many died in the open street. Others dying in their houses, made it known by the stench of their rotting bodies.

Consecrated churchyards did not suffice for the burial of the vast multitude of bodies, which were heaped by the hundreds in vast trenches, ...like goods in a ship's hold. "How different has life become in the last 650 years?" The bacterium that caused the Black Death, is now available as a plush stuffed ...bacterium. They don't actually look that threatening, especially with eyes. But yeah, this is Yersenia Pestis! (Blown up and made into a stuffed animal.) No bacterium!

Also you want to know an interesting fact about me? I- I can't juggle. Amid all this devastation, the Hundred Years War added sustained turmoil and destruction.

The war was fought between the rulers of the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of France, over who would rule large swaths of continental Europe, and it actually lasted at least 116 years, beginning in 1337. One of the most interesting questions in history is: "Whether war leads to instability or instability leads to war?" and the truth is probably .. Yes.

Both. Like, poor harvests and disease outbreaks make war more likely, but war also worsens poor harvests and disease outbreaks. So amid the huge shocks to Europe that accompanied the Black Death, the Hundred Years War increased instability in the food supply, and also in long-held cultural beliefs, like The Code of Chivalry.

Chivalry was a set of behaviors toward knightly opponents, whom one would treat on the battlefield with respect and trust, not killing your fellow knight, but, instead, holding him for ransom in good condition. Such noble behavior separated the knight from common archers and mercenaries. But English Kings began to hire such mercenaries from across Europe, who viciously looted and plundered in a way that wasn't terribly chivalrous.

And some of these knights for hire found it so profitable to fight that even during truces and peace treaties, they kept on marauding. The 116 Years War also changed the nature of war through innovation. Like, non-aristocratic soldiers from England and Wales used the longbow, famed for its combined deadly speed and accuracy, and that helped the English prevail at the Battle of Agincourt Before the 100 Years War, the French had innovated with cannons on ships, which the English later used in the war's land battles.

Both types of cannons, by the way, relied on gunpowder, a Chinese invention. The Hundred Years War also saw the spectacular rise and fall of Joan of Arc, born to a prosperous French peasant family in 1412. When she was sixteen, England had won enough battles to take over the French throne, confirmed in the 1420 Treaty of Troyes, and France seemed leaderless.

Visions told Joan to get French forces to take to the field and drive out the English, so that Charles, whom she believed to be the rightful heir to the French throne, could be crowned, and astonishingly this proved successful. By 1429, Charles was Charles VII of France. But in the process, the Burgundians, a competing and powerful royal court, captured Joan and turned her over to the English, who burned her at the stake in 1431.

It's a bad way to go. Although, there are no good ways. If it sounds like European life in the 14th and 15th centuries was hard, well, it was.

Murder and violent crime rates were likely much higher than they are today, and dying in war was a pretty routine risk. Malnutrition and stunting were also very common. Child mortality was astonishingly high; perhaps as many as 50% of children died before the age of five.

But at least people were surrounded by the comforts of religion. The comforts of religion, however, turned out not to be that comforting. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

In 1300, Pope Boniface VIII was the leader of the Catholic Church,

but he was also an important political figure in Europe. One of Europe's great questions was whether the Church had authority over the entire Catholic world, or if kings had the ultimate authority in their kingdoms? Could, for instance, King Philip IV of France tax the Catholic clergy in France?

Pope Boniface thought: No. He was from a well-connected and powerful family, and at the start of the 14th century, he was flexing his muscles across the papacy, ultimately declaring in 1302 that the Pope had supreme power over everyone! The timing was bad in that kings were also starting to flex their muscles.

They wanted tax money from the Church to expand their administration. Boniface threatened to excommunicate Philip, who then had the Pope kidnapped. Boniface was reportedly tortured in captivity and died soon after his release in 1303.

By 1305, Philip had arranged for the election of a French Pope and his installation at Avignon, just inside what was then the French border, which made people think that the papacy was under the thumb of French kings and distant from its spiritual mission, which you know, it was. In 1377 Pope Gregory XI decided to move back to Rome, but then he died. The Cardinals, surrounded by loyal Romans, then elected an Italian pope, causing the French Cardinals to scatter and regroup to elect a French pope to head the papal court in Avignon, which meant there were two popes and a schism had occurred.

Historians, in fact, call it the Great Schism. Thanks, Thought Bubble. The Great Schism was a huge blow to the Church and its claims of spiritual leadership, which had already been harmed by the clergy's inability or unwillingness to provide spiritual guidance during the Black Death.

Priests and monks and nuns had been as frightened of and as vulnerable to death as everyone else. And now it wasn't even clear which pope was the real Pope, or which church was the real Church. This disunity, combined with stories of decidedly unspiritual indulgences, all served to undermine the church's authority.

Instead, spiritual and other direction came from common people, not the high-and-mighty, like Catherine of Siena, for instance, was an ordinary young woman of intense religious faith, who was the one who successfully urged Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome. Although then of course, he died. Before Catherine died in 1380 at the age of 33, she'd undertaken several diplomatic missions between the Church and Italian cities and had traveled across the region urging the clergy to reform themselves and fortify their spiritual ministry.

Ultimately others in the Church called a council to end the Great Schism, and church leaders finally elected a single pope, Martin V, in 1417. Although before that, things got truly out of control when a third Pope was elected for a while. I mean, if you wanted to be Pope, your chances really were never better than in the late Middle Ages.

All of this meant that European Christendom really was declining in power, and in 1453, the Ottomans, a Turkic ethnic group of Muslims captured the capital of the Byzantine Empire, with the help, by the way, of a Hungarian munitions expert who knew about cannons. The Byzantine Emperor had felt that the munition expert's fees were too high. The Ottomans already controlled parts of southeastern Europe, but capturing the Byzantine capital and beheading its Emperor was a big deal.

It was the final fall of the Roman Empire, and Islam went on to replace Christianity as the leading religion in Constantinople, as its famed Cathedral became the Hagia Sophia mosque. And control of Constantinople was a big deal for many reasons, including trade routes, but also because Constantinople at the time was probably Europe's least terrible city Meanwhile, the aforementioned use of mercenaries helped undermine the feudal system, in which everyone owed loyalty to a lord, from knights to a serf, who was bound to that lord's land. The Black Death and persistent warfare helped change that too.

And there were also far fewer humans, which meant fewer people to work in agriculture, so serfs could demand their freedom because their labor had become much more valuable. Indeed, peasants rebelled when the nobility failed to meet their demands for better conditions. Like in the Peasants Revolt of 1381 in England, they murdered nobles and sacked castles and manor houses.

And in cities, urban artisans wanted higher pay and an end to higher taxes. In 1378, The Ciompi, or workers in the cloth trade, rebelled in Florence, demanding an end to harsh prosecution for debt and an end to the imposition of extra taxes. They marched through the streets, shouting, "Long live the little people." The expansion of rights for artisans and farm workers would of course be a very long process, but their growing power and the decline of feudalism was a dramatic shift for Europe.

Even warfare itself had changed. People no longer fought for ethical reasons or for God's glory but for fame and career, as a French chronicler observed. Cutting through the 116 years of back and forth victories and losses, this proverb arose about warfare: "That's the way it is with fighting.

Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose." As for life in these years, people recited proverbs like "There's nothing more certain than death." (someone along the way added "and taxes") Other proverbs emphasized that life had begun to feel like a zero-sum game. "The big fishes eat the smaller." "Men are good so long as it saves their skin." But in the midst of that, there was also new thinking. Not just that of The Ciompi and peasants, but of artists and philosophers and architects and others, who were simultaneously creating Europe's rebirth or Renaissance. The Great Renaissance Cathedral of Florence was even completed before the end of the Hundred Years War.

And next week, we'll start there, in Florence, which was home to so much of that so-called rebirth. Thanks for watching. I'll see you then.

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Thanks again for watching, and as they say in my hometown, "Don't forget to be awesome!" God, it's nice to be back.