

# Modern European History

## Unit 2 – The Renaissance

### Black Death Economics

#### History

In the middle 1300s, Europe experienced one of its most severe natural disasters: the Black Death. A combination of bubonic, septicemic, and pneumonic plagues, the Black Death appeared in Europe in 1347. It started in Constantinople and Sicily, spread through the Mediterranean, then invaded northern and western Europe in 1348 and 1349. By 1350, the Black Death had killed approximately one-third of the people of Europe, with mortality rates approaching 70 percent in some locations. Later visitations of the plague in the 1360s killed up to 20 percent of the survivors and their children.

Before the Black Death, the population of Western Europe had grown so much that it was difficult to feed everyone using the agricultural methods available then. Feeding that many people forced most people to work in agriculture, and tied them closely to the land and the medieval landlord-serf system.

#### Mystery

How could a natural disaster like the Black Death lead to better lives for European peasants?

#### Economic Scenario

It is the mid-1300s and you are an English noble with a modest estate of 1,000 acres of farmland, a small castle, and cottages for peasant families who work your land. You can use your 1,000 acres of farmland to either grow food or graze sheep, or some combination of the two. You need to be sure to set aside enough land to grow food to feed you and your family and the peasant families who work for you. If you graze sheep on any leftover land, you can gain money by selling wool for weavers to make into cloth. If you grow more food than you need, you can gain money by selling the surplus to craftsmen and merchants who live in a nearby town. You have to decide how you are going to use the land before and after the coming of the Black Death.

#### **Data** (*the money values are hypothetical*)

You have 1,000 acres of farmland.

Feeding each peasant and his family requires 30 acres of farmland.

Feeding you and your family requires 100 acres. (You eat better food than the peasants do.)

#### **The job of a peasant is to produce food for everyone, but he can also:**

grow food for market on 30 acres of land, producing £2 of income for you

**-OR-**

take care of sheep grazing on 150 acres of land, producing £5 worth of wool

#### CASE 1

**In 1345, before the Black Death, you have 15 peasants and their families living on your estate.**

1. How many acres of land do you need to feed your family and the 15 peasant families?
2. How many acres of land are left for producing food or wool for market?

*Adapted from World History: Focus on Economics*



3. How should you allocate this land between food production and sheep grazing, so that you get the most income?

Acres of Food Production:	Income Produced:
Acres of Sheep Grazing:	Income Produced:
<b>Total Income:</b>	

4. If a peasant from a neighboring estate wanted to move to your estate, would it be economically worthwhile to you now to let him move to your estate? After the Black Death, would it be profitable for you to **pay** a peasant to move to your land? Explain.

### Result

While the Black Death killed about one-third of the people of Europe, it did not affect the amount of land and other natural resources available. By increasing the amount of land per person, the Black Death made serfs much more valuable to landlords, allowing the serfs to gain increased independence and eventual freedom from the feudal system. The increase in the amount of land per person also made it profitable for landowners to use more land for grazing sheep, leading to more wool production, which in turn led to a shift in employment from farming to manufacturing woolen goods.