

PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING  
IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

# BLACK DEATH

Shelagh A. Gallagher

Problem Log

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## Welcome to the Middle Ages

The year is 1348, and you are living in Lucca, a city near the city-state of Florence. A dedicated member of your village, you have just been appointed to the Council of Elders. You were selected from a larger group called the Council of the People. You take great pride in this. While the hundreds of members of the Council of People *pass* laws, the smaller and more prestigious Council of Elders *writes* laws and makes suggestions when issues arise that need action. Being selected as a part of the Council of Elders means the people of your town have confidence in your ability to solve problems and settle disputes.

It's time for you to get to know your town! Each of the short readings on the next few pages describes something about life in 1348. Read the description you have been assigned, and follow the instructions to complete the assignment. There is space for your work on each page. When everyone is finished, the class will discuss the readings, and together we will create a picture of what it was like to live in a village in 1348.





## Your Place in Your Medieval Town

You feel lucky to be a freeman in this village. Your father was a serf; he farmed for the manor lord most days and grew food for his family on a small corner of the land when he could. Being a serf was little more than slavery. You remember spending hours gathering acres and acres of wheat as a child and riding in your father's cart as he took the harvest to the manor lord. It was a hard living.

Your father wanted you to have a better life, so when you were old enough, he made you an apprentice to a local weaver. Instead of gathering wheat, you carded endless skeins of thread. But in the end, it was worth it because now you are a member of the Guild of Weavers. You own your own shop and live in the city instead of the country. You look forward to the occasional trips you make to Pistoia and Florence to sell your fabric.

You, your spouse, and your three children now live in a two-room house. This is a step up in the world compared to the hovel in the country, but sometimes you miss the open space of the countryside. And as much as you disliked the smell of the farms, you've discovered that the smell of waste and unbathed people in close quarters is just as rank.

You always try to buy food from the free serfs, since you understand that their life is hard. You still pay taxes to the manor lord to make sure you have the protection of his warriors, but that is better than spending your life doing his bidding. You look up at the manor house, with its imposing stone walls and gated courtyard. Life in there must be much different! You've never been to the manor, but your neighbor got to go inside once to make a delivery of pheasants for the lord's dinner. Your neighbor came back filled with stories of goblets made of glass, gold plates, and fireplaces in every room. You wonder how the stories could be true.





## Your Place in Your Medieval Town Sketch Sheet

What is the layout of your town? What does it look like in the countryside, in town, and at the manor? Who are the people? What relationships do they have to one another? Draw a sketch of your medieval town. Include four important items from the reading that you think are necessary for your image to be accurate and realistic. Label each!



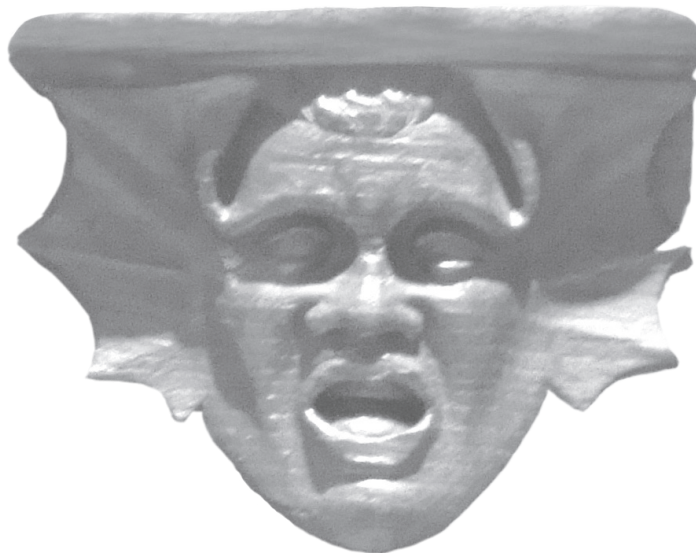


## Life at Home in Your Medieval Town

Remember that the year is 1348; the place is Lucca. You have just finished dinner. Now you're scattering the remains of dinner on the rush mat on the floor. The dogs enjoy them, and you know that the rats that dig through the rushes will eat what the dogs don't. Soon it will be time to take the waste bucket out to the street—good to get that out of the house! Things get pretty smelly when five people live in two rooms. But you don't think it's unusual—most people you know live pretty much the same way.

Your youngest son is happily trying to chase a chicken outside, but your middle child has hurt his arm. He cut it playing outside. Your wife applied some herbs, but now there is pus coming out of the wound. Your son is lying on his bed, which is on a pallet in the same room where you, your spouse, and your two other children sleep. The doctor has just arrived. When you ask what the problem might be and what to do about it, he tells you that your son's blood is dirty. He recommends that you burn sage in the bedroom and that the child eat raw garlic. You hold your son steady as the doctor bleeds the wound to let the bad blood out. As he leaves, he suggests that the family pay an extra tithe, or tax, to the Church and say extra prayers so that no one else falls ill.

After the doctor leaves, you throw the child's bad blood out into the street with the rest of the waste. Then you light the grease lamp and call the children to evening prayers. When prayers are finished, your wife begins the porridge for the next day's breakfast, and you and your sons clean your tools so they are ready for another day of work.





# Life at Home in Your Medieval Town Sketch Sheet

What does it look like at home in your medieval town? Draw what your house looks like, inside and out. What is around the house? Include four important items from the reading that you think are necessary for your image to be accurate and realistic. Label each!





## The Church in Your Medieval Town

You pay taxes to the manor lord so that you receive his protection from outside invasion. However, both you and the manor lord owe fealty, or loyalty, to the Church. From the city of Avignon, Pope Clement VI announces rules that *everyone*—serfs, peasants, freemen, and even noblemen—must follow. You know that the church is affluent and important because it is the only stone building in town—aside from the manor, that is. But unlike the manor, the church is in the center of town.

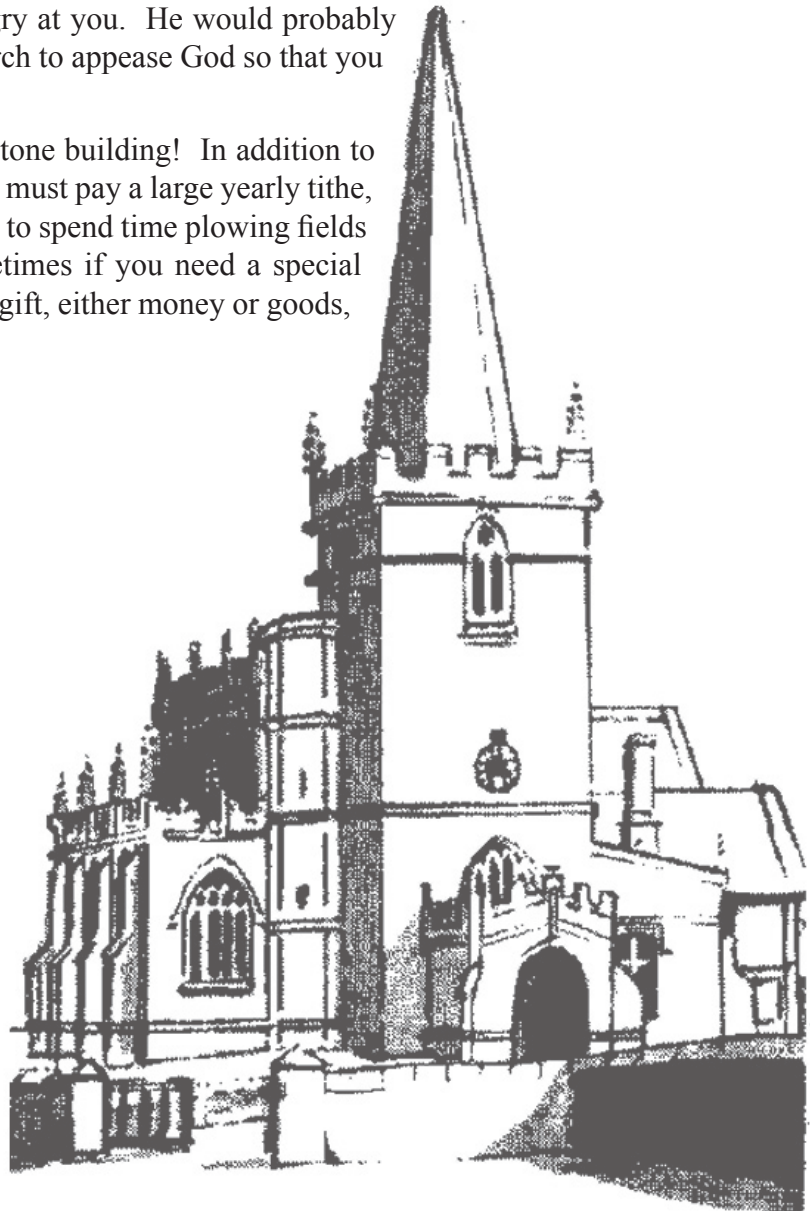
You participate in more than 40 holy days that the Church observes each year. You also fast—sometimes three days a week. Of course, fasting is easier when food is short—who knows the difference? No meat on Wednesday, Friday, or Saturday, and none at all at Advent and Lent. Only the fine people living in the manor house can afford fish.

The Church also has something to say about why you get sick and what you should do about it. If you broke your arm, the local barber could set it, but if you became really sick, you would have to get help from both a physician and a priest. The priest would likely suggest that you were sick because God was angry at you. He would probably ask that you make an offering to the Church to appease God so that you would get better.

No wonder the Church can afford a stone building! In addition to paying taxes to the lord of the manor, you must pay a large yearly tithe, or tax, to the local priest. Your father had to spend time plowing fields to grow food for the priests, too. Sometimes if you need a special favor from the Church, you give an extra gift, either money or goods, to the priest.



The most common image of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was Christ on the cross.





## The Church in Your Medieval Town Sketch Sheet

How important is the Church in your medieval town? Where is it located? How do priests and bishops interact with townspeople? Create a sketch showing the role of the Church in your medieval town. Include four important items from the reading that you think are necessary for your image to be accurate and realistic. Label each!







## The Market in Your Medieval Town

In the marketplace, you peruse the available food. Your youngest son is waiting in line to pick up the family loaves of bread—and to pay the manor lord for providing the oven. You walk past the barrels of salted fish, where a half-dozen cats are camped out. You go past the baskets of eggs. Because it is still early spring, you don't even look for vegetables and fruit; they won't appear until the growing season

is well under way. As you turn the corner, you see the butcher's stall. The meat looks fairly fresh, unlike last week. There aren't as many flies hovering around; this is a good sign. But the line is long and the supply is short, and you hope that there will be enough for you to buy some. Last week there wasn't.

Yesterday was a fasting day, so today you are looking forward to a good meal with meat! This is one of the biggest changes from your childhood as a serf, when you ate mostly barley—barley mush, barley soup, barley bread. Your parents even drank ale made from barley. No matter how it's prepared, it's hard to hide the taste of barley. Or the taste of pottage, a stew made of oatmeal with beans, onions, and vegetables like turnips. Now that you are better off, you can have meat once a week or maybe meat and chicken in the same week. But recently, food has been scarcer than it used to be, and prices are going up. A meal with meat is more of a luxury. As you stand and wait in line, you distractedly watch a couple of mice gnawing their way through the bags of grain at the next stall.

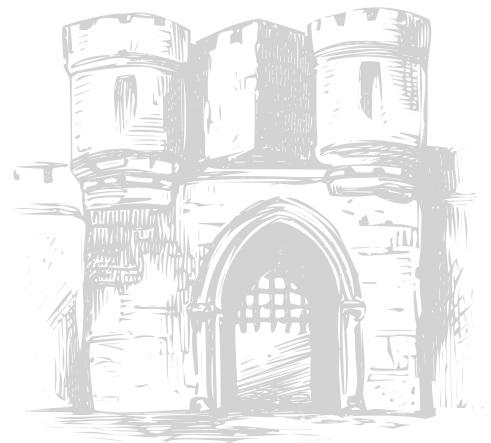
You hear a rumble and glance up. Rain. Again. Sometimes it seems like it will never stop raining. Oh well; there's nothing to do but stand and hope that there is still some meat left when you get to the head of the line.





# The Market in Your Medieval Town Sketch Sheet

What does the market in your medieval town look like? Where is it located? What kinds of shops are there? How is food sold? Draw the market in your medieval town. Include four important items from the reading that you think are necessary for your image to be accurate and realistic. Label each!





## How Are We Vulnerable?

Vulnerability means being unusually exposed to a particular kind of emotional or physical injury. Put another way, being vulnerable increases the risk that something bad will happen.

**Example:** *Poor eyesight makes people vulnerable to bumping into doors because they can't see. However, poor eyesight does not make people vulnerable to hearing loss.*

Sometimes vulnerability is necessary—like when you cross the street or when you ask a new classmate to play. Even in cases like these, it's a good idea to know how you're vulnerable and how to minimize possible harm.

*Directions: Think about the medieval town you started creating today as you fill in the blanks in the sentences below. Use information from the Your Medieval Town sheets to find aspects of medieval life that cause different types of vulnerability. Example: **Lack of food** makes us vulnerable to **starvation** because **people need food to live**.*

1. \_\_\_\_\_ makes us vulnerable to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ makes us vulnerable to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

3. \_\_\_\_\_ makes us vulnerable to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ makes us vulnerable to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

5. \_\_\_\_\_ makes us vulnerable to \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.

