Medieval Towns

Picture yourself and a friend walking happily down a street in a town of medieval times. Together you are discussing plans for the evening, and neither of you has any idea of the catastrophe that is about to unfold.

As you round a corner, you hear a shrill voice coming from the window of a house six stories above the street. The voice belongs to a lady issuing a warning that roughly translates into "look out below!" Before you can take evasive action, you are suddenly drenched with a bucket of gooey garbage. Your nose tells you it is a mixture of black pudding, beans, and the remains of eels the family on the sixth floor had for dinner.

Do you angrily make your way up to the room from whence came the garbage and express your displeasure? Do you threaten to punch the lady's husband in the nose? Of course not. You brush yourself off as best you can and go on your way. If anyone is to be scolded, it is you for not having jumped out of the way quickly enough.

Garbage (and worse) being thrown into the street was a common practice in medieval towns. Even birth and rank held no privilege when it came to being hit with something unpleasant. No less a person than King Louis IX of France was himself doused with the contents of a chamber pot while strolling along a Paris street one fine day.

In the absence of any kind of sanitation service, people did the natural thing and tossed their waste wherever it might fall. Had they realized the health threats involved they surely would have acted differently. As it was, they relied on pigs and other animals that roamed free to take the place of the present-day garbage truck. Sometimes a particularly hard rain would help by washing away some of the refuse.

It is only natural that under such unsanitary conditions disease would run rampant. Epidemics that took the lives of large portions of the populations of medieval villages and towns were common. One such epidemic of the bubonic

A priest prays for victims of the plague. Those who became ill often died within hours.

plague in the fourteenth century wiped out not only entire towns but possibly a third of the population of Europe. That was the dreaded "Black Death" that appeared in Europe in the year 1347.

Bubonic plague is a disease transmitted to humans by fleas from rats. When the disease appears today anywhere in the world, it can quickly be brought under control. During the Middle Ages, however, neither the nature of the disease nor a treatment for it were known. When it struck, its victims died almost immediately. Many people went to bed perfectly healthy and died before the sun rose the next day. The term *Black Death* came from the fact that black spots appeared on the bodies of all who contracted it. Before it ran its course, the disease took the lives of some fifty million people.

The series of plagues that swept Europe actually played a role in weakening feudalism. The dramatic population decline led to a severe labor shortage, making serfs' and peasants' labor much more valuable. Therefore, they were able to negotiate more rights and better conditions from their lords. In addition, the population of towns recovered more rapidly, so towns became more important than feudal estates.

Although towns in the Middle Ages were dirty, unsafe, and dangerous, they represented a step forward from the instability of the Dark Ages. The uncertainty of feudal life caused people to seek safety either near the castle of a powerful lord or on the grounds of some remote monastery. This need for safety actually led to the reappearance of towns. As more and more people gathered around places that could afford them protection, castle and monastery grounds began to take on the appearance of villages. In time these villages became towns. As these towns grew in population and prospered, many were able to buy their freedom from the feudal lord who controlled them. Others won their independence through armed uprisings. A dramatic increase in population in the twelfth century also led to more urbanizations.

More towns appeared as travel became safer and trade increased. Some towns sprang up at crossroads, where traders and merchants came and went. Others developed near rivers or along seacoasts. Some towns, such as Paris, France, and Florence, Italy, were quite large. Most, however, averaged between five thousand and ten thousand people in population.

Towns that developed while national governments were weak and conditions were still unstable had high walls for protection. It was the presence of such walls that made medieval towns crowded. With only so much ground space available, it was necessary to construct buildings as high as six and seven

stories. As each story was added, the builder extended it out somewhat over the street to make it larger. By the time the building reached the sixth or seventh level, the occupant of the top floor could literally reach out and touch the building across the street. How's that for close neighbors?

It was this closeness of the buildings that made fire an ever-present threat. Because most structures until the Renaissance period were built of wood, fire spread quickly once it started. Some towns were partially or totally destroyed by fire a number of times. London burned four times in the twelfth century, and Rouen, France, the city where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake in 1431, was totally consumed six times between 1200 and 1225. Later, when stone was used for construction and fire brigades introduced, the number of fires were reduced dramatically.

Monteriggioni, in Tuscany, Italy, is an example of a walled town from the later Middle Ages.

Appearance-wise, medieval towns were generally laid out in the same way. In the center was a large open area variously referred to as a square, a place, or a piazza. If the town was very large, the square might also be the location of a cathedral. Towns squares were hubs of activity where tradesmen and merchants set up stalls and conducted business. Sometimes strolling actors drew crowds as they performed a play for all who would stop and listen. So too did jugglers, tumblers, and clowns. Between 8:00 and 9:00 P.M. the curfew bell rang, and most citizens retired for the night behind the safety of their doors. Streets were dark and danger ever-present, and there were few policemen to guarantee the safety of any person who dared to venture out. Those who did were required to carry a light and have a good reason to be outside.

Who were the inhabitants of these early towns? Most were members of a new middle class of merchants, traders, and craftsmen referred to as the *bourgeoisie*. *Bourgeoisie* is a French term meaning "town dweller." In the German language, the term becomes *burgher* or *burger*. A free town with the right of self-government was called a *borough,* or in German *burg*. You are probably beginning to see the influence on America by now. What about

Pittsburgh and *Harrisburg*? And *hamburger*? Supposedly, immigrants from the German city of Hamburg brought that American favorite with them when they arrived in the 1800s.

The merchants and craftsmen monopolized business within the walls of a city. They formed guilds, which in some ways resembled early labor unions. Membership in the appropriate guild was mandatory for all merchants and craftsmen. A young man had to pass through a training stage before becoming a full-fledged member. First, beginning about the age of seven, a boy desiring to learn a trade was apprenticed to a master craftsman. When he acquired the skills to earn a living, he became a journeyman. As such, he could then work for anyone who would hire him. If he wanted to become a master craftsman and own his own shop, he had to pass a strict exam supervised by leading members of the guild. This involved creating a masterpiece of work showing that he had mastered his particular skill.

Merchant and craft guilds became increasingly powerful through the Middle Ages as towns grew. Whereas knights lived for war, peace and stability were in the best interests of traders and craftsmen who wanted to conduct a profitable business. Therefore, town guilds often supported the king against troublemaking nobles, further weakening the feudal system.

A guild master judging the skills of two journeymen.

Most of the other inhabitants of medieval cities were laborers who took any job they could find. These included serfs who had either run away from the manor or had been granted their freedom. Each town also had its share of beggars and thieves, both of whom preyed on the local citizenry. With streets so crowded and so many people about, a fast thief with an even faster knife could cut a purse away from a belt in record time and be gone in a flash. Towns did their best to discourage such lawbreakers, even leaving executed criminals hanging from the gallows indefinitely. Paris, for example, always had twenty-four bodies swinging at the end of ropes for all to see. The message to passersby was simple: Behave yourself while in our town or face the consequences!

Such was life in typical towns of the Middle Ages.

Research Bubonic Plague

Some information about bubonic plague was presented in this packet. Find out more about this terrible disease by consulting an encyclopedia or some other source. Then answer these six questions.

1. What causes bubonic plague?

   _____

   _____

2. How is the plague transmitted?

   _____

   _____

3. List any four symptoms of the plague.

   _____   _____

   _____   _____

4. How is the plague treated in modern times?

   _____

   _____

5. How can the plague be prevented or at least kept from spreading?

   _____

   _____

6. To refer to the Black Death of the Middle Ages solely as an epidemic is not entirely correct. Epidemics may be either *endemic* or *pandemic*. Look up each word in a dictionary and write its meaning. Then tell whether the Black Death of the Middle Ages was endemic or pandemic in nature.
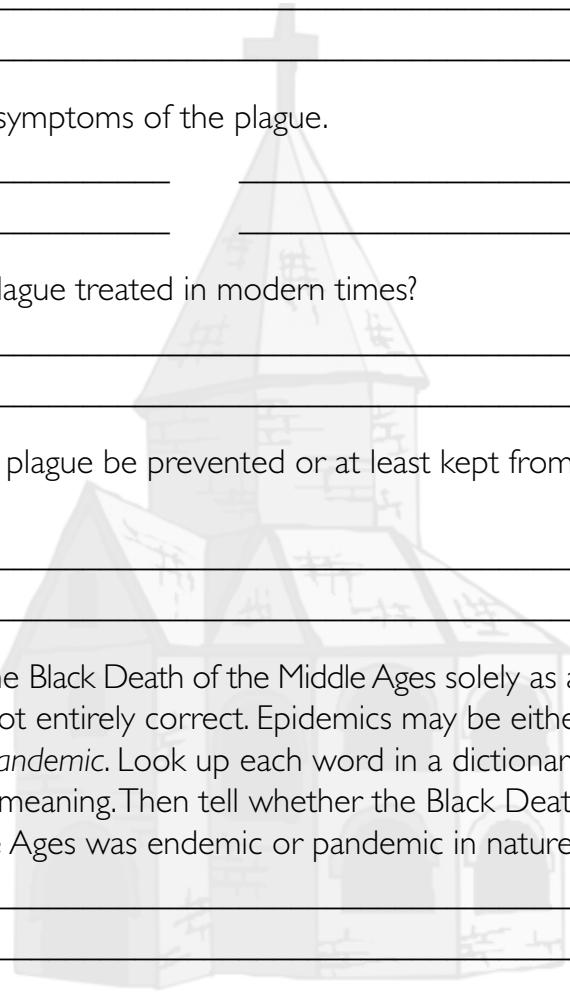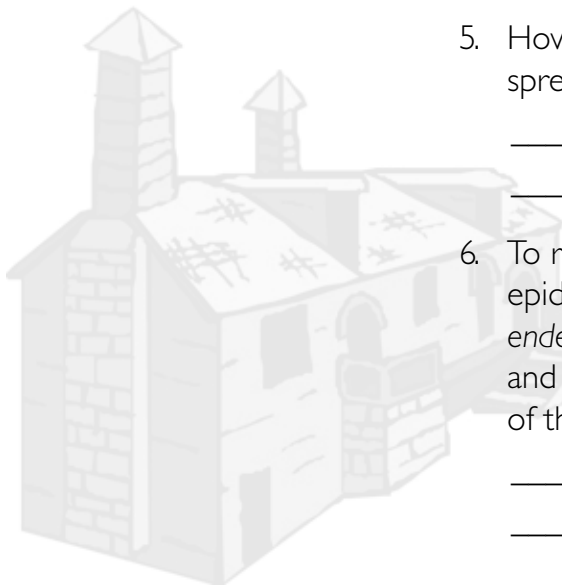
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Finish a Story

When the Black Death struck a community or town in the 1300s, people panicked. They did not know what caused the disease and they had no idea how to treat it. Many thought it was God's punishment for their sins. Whatever they believed, they often fled to the countryside, hoping to avoid exposure to what was almost certain death.

Imagine you are living in an English town during the bubonic plague epidemic of the 1340s. One day, while watching the ships come in at the docks, you see a vessel run aground a short distance away. A quick check by dock workers reveals the terrible truth: The entire crew has succumbed to the Black Death.

Complete the story that has been started for you. Give it any kind of ending you prefer. Continue on a separate sheet of paper if necessary.

Thomas and I watched the grounded ship with a mixture of curiosity and horror. Even at our young age, we suspected what a group of men who boarded the ship soon confirmed.

"The Black Death! The Black Death!" they shouted as they fled in the direction of the town. "The Black Death!"

Upon seeing the panic and terror in their faces, Thomas and I too turned and ran as fast as our legs could carry us. Mother saw us approaching from a window and greeted us at the door.

"Thomas! Jonathan! What in the world is the matter?"

"It's the plague, Mother! The plague is here!"
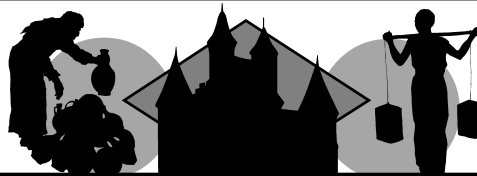
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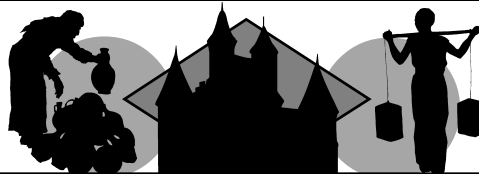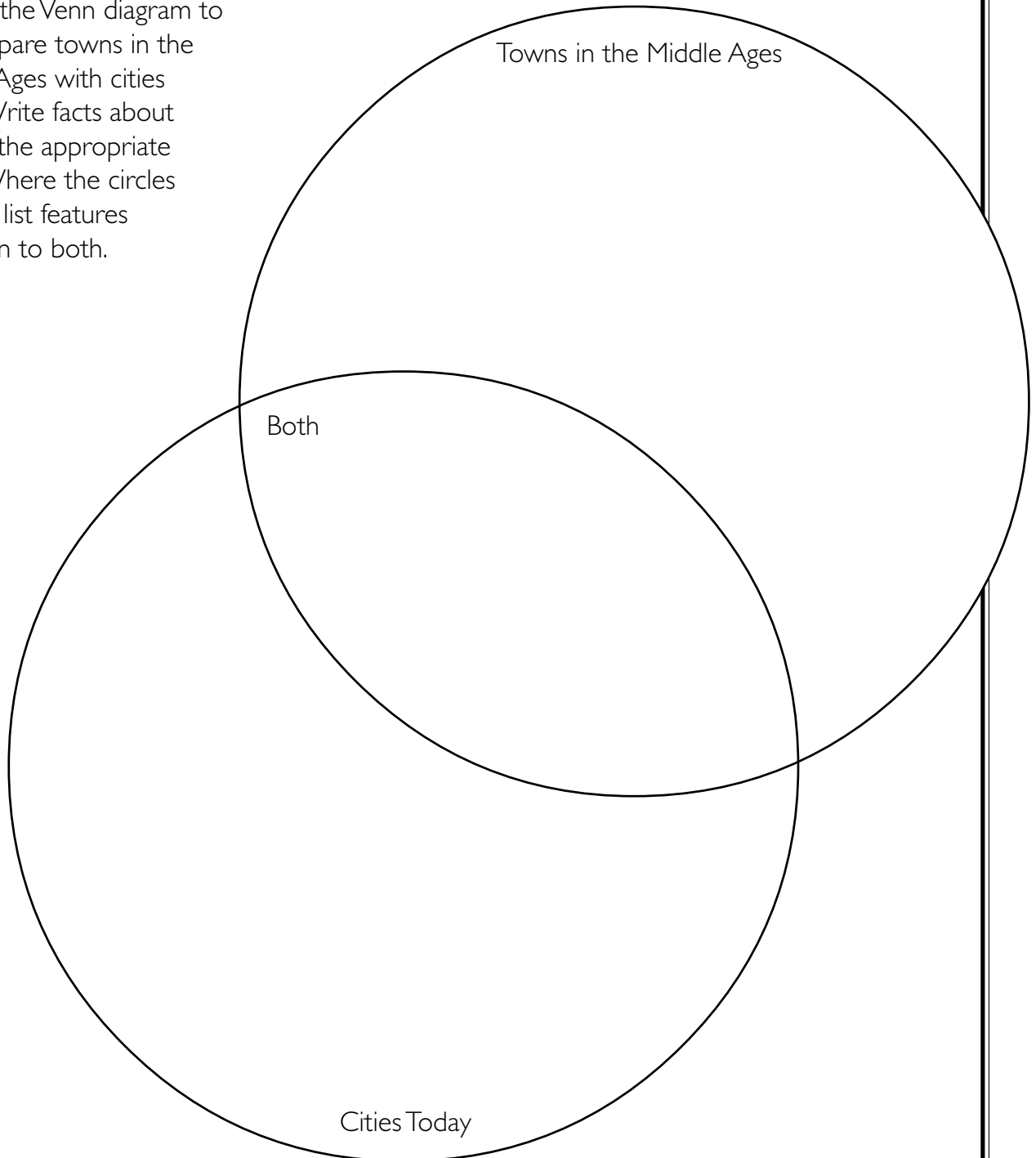
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Fill in a Venn Diagram

Fill in the Venn diagram to compare towns in the Middle Ages with cities today. Write facts about each in the appropriate place. Where the circles overlap, list features common to both.
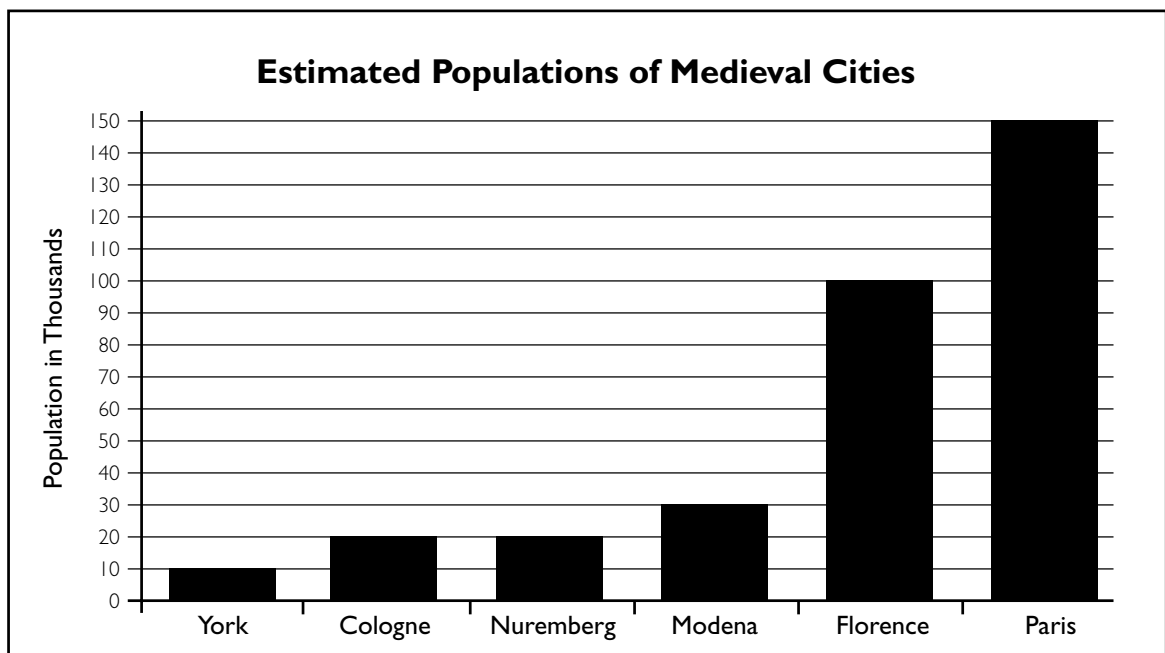
Towns in the Middle Ages

Both

Cities Today

Interpret a Bar Graph

The following graph shows the estimated populations of five European cities around the year 1300. The cities are Paris, France; Florence, Italy; Modena, Italy; York, England; Nuremberg, Germany; and Cologne, Germany.

Use the information from the graph and answer the questions at the bottom of the page. It might be helpful to review the terms *mode, range,* and *median* in your mathematics book before proceeding.

Write your answers on the lines following the questions.

Estimated Populations of Medieval Cities

Population in Thousands

City	Population
York	10
Cologne	20
Nuremberg	20
Modena	30
Florence	100
Paris	150

1. How many times greater was the population of Paris than that of York?
   _____ times greater.
2. What mode is represented by the population figures on the graph? _____
3. What is the range? _____
4. What is the average population of the six cities? _____
5. Why can you state that no median is represented by the numbers on the graph?

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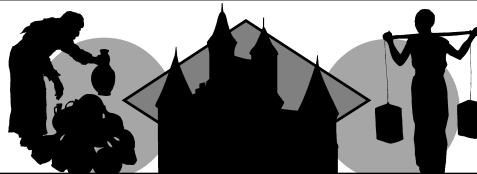
Everyday Life: Middle Ages

Answer Key

Research Bubonic Plague

Students' answers should be similar to the following:
1. a bacterium called Yersinia pestis
2. by fleas that bite infected rats
3. chills and fever; headache; body pains; swelling of lymph glands in neck, groin, and armpits
4. with such drugs as tetracycline and streptomycin
5. through sanitation and rat control, isolating patients, and taking antibiotics if you might have been exposed
6. endemic—found in a particular locale; pandemic—affecting a large number of the population over a wide area. The Black Death was pandemic.

Fill in a Venn Diagram

Answers will vary but should be similar to the following:
Towns in the Middle Ages: dirty; unsafe; small and crowded; fire hazards; bustling; dark; buildings made of wood
Both: crowded (some); dirty and unsafe (some); bustling
Cities Today: street lights; cars, taxis, buses, etc.; police; larger in size; buildings of brick or stone or metal

Interpret a Bar Graph

1. 15
2. 20,000
3. 140,000
4. 55,000
5. No figure falls in the middle.