

Maybe the Black Death did not reshape human evolution after all

The [Black Death](#) struck Cambridge, England, in 1349. The bodies piled up so fast — up to six in ten people died in Europe — that gravediggers struggled to keep up, and many remains wound up in mass burials.

Despite its heavy toll, this wave of bubonic plague doesn't seem to have had a lasting impact on the genomes of the people of Cambridge, suggests a [17 January study in *Science Advances*](#).

“Because it's such a devastating event, people naturally expect it will leave some genetic signature,” says Ruoyun Hui, a population geneticist at the University of Cambridge, UK, who co-led the latest study. “We didn't find much evidence supporting adaptation of immune responses.”

Follow the latest news and policy debates on sustainable agriculture, biomedicine, and other ‘disruptive’ innovations. Subscribe to our newsletter.

[SIGN UP](#)

Ultimately, the debate is about timescales. “Personally, I think that a single epidemic is unlikely to make much difference,” says [population geneticist Iain] Mathieson, “but repeated epidemics and pandemics certainly could.”

Firm answers on the Black Death's impact — or that of any past disease outbreak — will require thousands of ancient-human genomes and maybe more, researchers agree. “I don't think it's going to be resolved in a definitive manner that pleases everyone one until we reach much, much larger sample sizes,” says [human population geneticist Luis] Barreiro.

[This is an excerpt. Read the full article here](#)