

# ***THE BLACK DEATH***

## **Europe & the Late Middle Ages**



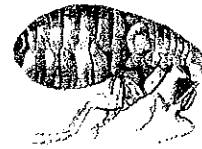
In the 1340's western Europe experienced a disaster so great that many people thought the end of the world had come. Italian trading ships returning from ports on the Black Sea brought back one of the most devastating disease epidemics in history: the Black Death. It is believed to have originated in Northern India or China and was first recorded amongst the Mongols in the 1330's. From there, the disease spread along the Silk Route through Asia and into Europe and the Middle East.

The Black Death was a variety of bubonic plague, a highly contagious, usual fatal disease. It spread from victim to victim through the fleas on rats, which lived on medieval ships and throughout towns and cities. At a time when cleanliness and hygiene were not ranked of high importance, the disease spread as people were bit by fleas. Once a person had been bitten with the disease, it was spread through coughing, sneezing and close human contact.

### **Symptoms of the Black Death:**

A diseased person would know quite quickly if they had the Plague:

- the person would quickly develop Buboes (swollen lymph glands)
- dark blotches on the skin that turned black (and slowly rot)
- a high fever
- vomiting blood
- hallucinations



Most victims died within 1-3 days of catching the disease.

The dead outnumbered the living in some towns and cities and no one wanted to collect the dead in fear of catching the disease.

### **Medieval Medicine**

Medieval medicine had no cure for the disease. (remember, this was a time of very little science and mostly a strong belief in God) "Doctors" recommended burning sulphur and smelling garlic as ways of preventing the spread of the plague. Neither was helpful.

## Ghost Towns

It is estimated that over 25 million people (1/3 of all the people in Europe) died from the plague. Thousands of villages became ghost towns (everyone died) and no one knew until World War II (1939-45) when aerial photographs showed the outlines of old towns from the air.

## Impact of the Plague

The black plague brought out the best and worst of people. Many priests, nuns, and doctors died because they spent so much time helping the sick. On the other hand, some parents abandoned their sick children, and thieves robbed from corpses or broke into dead people's homes.

Groups of religious fanatics (extremists) called "Flagellants" traveled from town to town spreading the idea that the plague was a punishment from God.



## Economic Effects of the Black Death

The Black Death changed Europe forever, not only by killing so many people, but also by damaging the feudal system. Feudalism was based on farming and with the growth of towns and trade, the system was already beginning to weaken. After the Black Death, labour was in such short supply that workers could travel from estate to estate and ask for higher wages. Because of the labour shortage (no people) and the rise in wages, many feudal estates went bankrupt and the entire system fell apart.

## HOW DID THE BLACK DEATH END?

The disease slowly went away but the population of Europe had dropped by 25 million people. (Canada today has a total of 34 million people) With not enough people to work in jobs, workers who were still alive began to ask for higher wages and independence and ownership began to emerge. Cities thrived and it was becoming less common for people to work on farms. People began to question why they hadn't had this independence before and people across Europe began to question other areas of life as well. ....on to the Renaissance!