

The Black Death, Part I

In October 1347, the people of Messina, a port on the northeastern shores of the Mediterranean island of Sicily, experienced an unforgettable sight.

A convoy of a dozen Italian trading ships sailed into the harbor with dead and dying men at the oars. Those still barely alive had a hideous look about them. Black, egg-sized lumps, oozing blood and pus, formed in the armpits and groins of afflicted men. Boils and blackened spots dotted their bodies. Everything about them smelled foul: their wounds, their blood, their sweat, even their breath.

An eyewitness to these wretched men wrote the following:

In their bones they bore so virulent [strong] a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade [avoid] death.

City officials, fearful of the spread of the disease, tried to keep these death ships out of Messina, but it was too late. Frightened Messinans fled their city to escape the disease. However, they only managed to spread the illness further and faster. By early 1348, it had found its way to mainland Italy and France.

The great plague, soon to be called the Black Death, arrived on the shores of Europe and soon spread to nearly every corner of the Continent.

What was this dreadful disease and how was it spread? Often called *the bubonic plague*, it was caused by bacteria which developed in the blood of a certain type of flea. The bacillus caused the flea's stomach to block, making it unable to take in food properly.

Such fleas were frequently found on black rats. The fleas bit the rats by inserting a pricker into the host's skin to feed on its blood. With an infected flea's stomach blocked, it would regurgitate the rat's blood along with the plague bacteria. A bite from an infected rat or flea could then pass the infection to a human.

Once contracted, the disease was almost always fatal. The bacteria could infect the bloodstream and settle in the lymph glands, causing large lumps, called *buboes*, on the skin.

Lymph infections caused blood hemorrhages, turning the skin black, including the tongue (hence the name *Black Death*). Some forms of the disease infected the throat and lungs. Such victims coughed up blackened blood and gave off a foul smell. Pain was intense and death came swiftly, typically within three days or less.

Even before the arrival of the Genoese ships in Messina, Europeans had heard of a great plague in the East. Beginning probably in China, it spread to central Asia, then to India and Persia. By 1346 it made its way to Syria, Egypt, and Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

Trading ships unknowingly helped spread the disease, as did land trade caravans. Others, too, spread the plague. Central Asian warrior nomads, called *tatars*, invaded Europe in 1346, bringing the disease with them.

One such band of warriors, while laying siege to the city gates of the port of Caffa on the Russian Crimean Sea, fell victim to the Black Death. Rather than retreat, they loaded their catapults with the putrid corpses of dead comrades, and flung them into the city, spreading the disease among their enemies.



The Black Death, Part II

Once the bubonic plague landed on the island of Sicily in October of 1347, it spread quickly throughout the European continent. With no understanding of disease, germs, or bacteria, medieval people did not know how to begin fighting the disease.

The Black Death was, by its nature, a disease which spread rapidly. By January of 1348, it had spread to France, landing first in the Mediterranean port city of Marseilles. Within the next six months, it made its deadly way into eastern Spain, all of Italy, the southern reaches of Eastern Europe, and across the hills and valleys of France as far as Paris.

Before year's end, it had traveled across the English Channel to the British Isles. The next year—1349—brought the infection to nearly all of England, Ireland, Scotland, modern Belgium, the German states, and the Scandinavian countries. The great cities of Europe—London, Paris, Rome, Florence, Pisa, Frankfurt, Cologne, Ghent—were all centers of the Black Death. In 1349, Paris reported 800 deaths daily, Vienna 600, and Pisa 500. In some cities, as much as 80% of the population died.

As the plague advanced, frightened people tried to flee ahead of it, often carrying the disease with them to the next town, port, or village.

People stayed to themselves, refusing to come in contact with outsiders, even their own servants. Family members abandoned one another, leaving the dying miserable and alone.

Remote farms were not necessarily safe; sheep and hogs contracted the disease, just as rats did, spreading it to their masters.

Life everywhere changed dramatically in the face of this powerful killer. It was the speed of the disease which caused its potency. The plague consumed its victims so quickly that a person might go to bed feeling well and die in his or her sleep. Doctors called to tend to the sick sometimes caught

the plague and died ahead of their patients. Present at the bedside of the suffering to provide last rites, priests died in great numbers

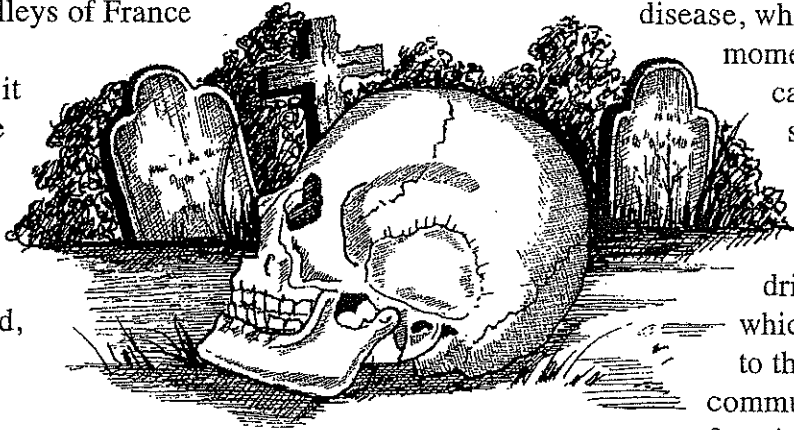
In the southern French city of Avignon, specific death numbers were recorded. In one three-day period, 1500 people died in the city. Many Roman Catholic clergymen were counted among the dead, including five cardinals, 100 bishops, and 358 Dominican friars. A single Avignon graveyard received 11,000 corpses.

The threat of the Black Death nearly drove some people to the brink of insanity. This dreaded disease, which could strike at any moment without warning, caused some panicky souls to gather in church graveyards where they sang and danced wildly, hoping to drive away the evil spirits which had brought the death to their village or community. Also, such frenzied activity would

hopefully keep the dead from rising from their burial places, so that they would not infect anyone else with the plague. People often gathered in long processions of dancing and singing. Sometimes such paranoid people danced until they fell exhausted or died of self-induced fear.

Today, historians do not have a clear estimate of the number of people who died at the hands of the Black Death. Tens of thousands of villages and rural settlements disappeared, their inhabitants killed. The populations of monasteries, abbeys, and universities were wiped out. Across Europe, villas, castles, and homes were abandoned.

Modern estimates place the death toll from recurring outbreaks of the plague at 20 million, or perhaps one out of every three persons.



Review and Write

What were some of the reasons why the Black Death killed so many people in Europe?