

Name:

Date:

The Black Death

Instructions: Read the article. Define the terms in bold using context clues or a dictionary. Then answer the questions that follow.

Between 1347 and 1351 a great outbreak of disease known as the Black Death ravaged Europe. This pandemic took a proportionately greater toll of life than any other known epidemic or war up to that time. The Black Death is widely believed to have been the result of plague that was caused by infection with the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Most scientists think that this bacterium was first passed from infected rodents to humans through flea bites. Then it spread quickly from one person to another.

The Disease

Plague is an infectious fever that takes three forms in humans: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The bubonic type is the mildest, accounting today for virtually no deaths and in the past killing about half of its victims. It is named for one of the disease's characteristics, the formation of buboes, or inflamed lymph glands. Pneumonic plague attacks the lungs and is often fatal in three or four days without treatment. In septicemic plague, bacteria overwhelm the bloodstream and often cause death within 24 hours, before other symptoms have a chance to develop. The pandemic was called the Black Death because of the black spots that appeared on the skin of many victims.

It is believed that the Black Death was a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague. Bubonic plague does not pass directly from person to person. The bacteria are carried from rodent to person or from person to person by infected fleas. Pneumonic plague, however, is highly infectious. The bacteria can be passed from person to person in droplets from coughs or sneezes. The living conditions in medieval cities and towns encouraged the spread of the disease. Poor sanitation in cities such as London and Bristol, England, created breeding grounds for rats that carried the disease. In addition, overcrowded housing in the cities encouraged the spread of plague from person to person.



A plague-infected Oriental rat flea (*Xenopsylla cheopis*). The flea transmits plague bacteria from infected rats to any person it bites.

Dr. Pratt—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Image Number: 2069)

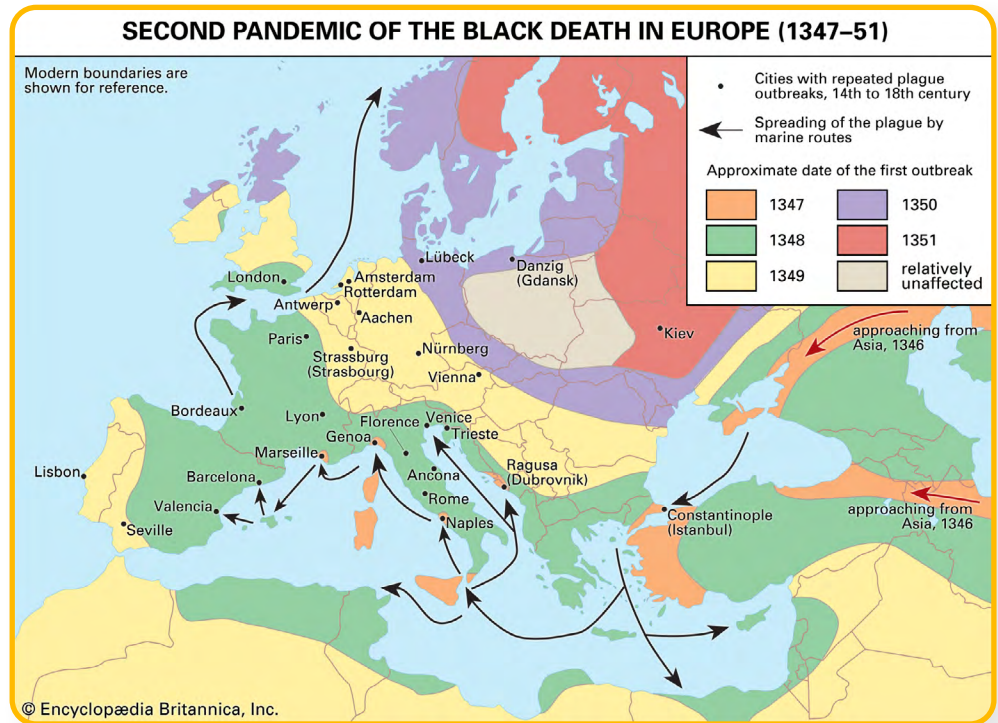
Reach of the Black Death

Plague is an ancient disease that has been verified as occurring as early as the 6th century CE. The epidemic of the 14th century originated in China and Central Asia. It was transmitted to Europe in 1347 when a Eurasian army besieged the Genoese trading post of Kaffa in the Crimean Peninsula. The army catapulted plague-infected corpses into the town in an effort to infect the enemy. From Kaffa, Genoese ships carried the disease westward to Mediterranean ports, and from there it spread inland.

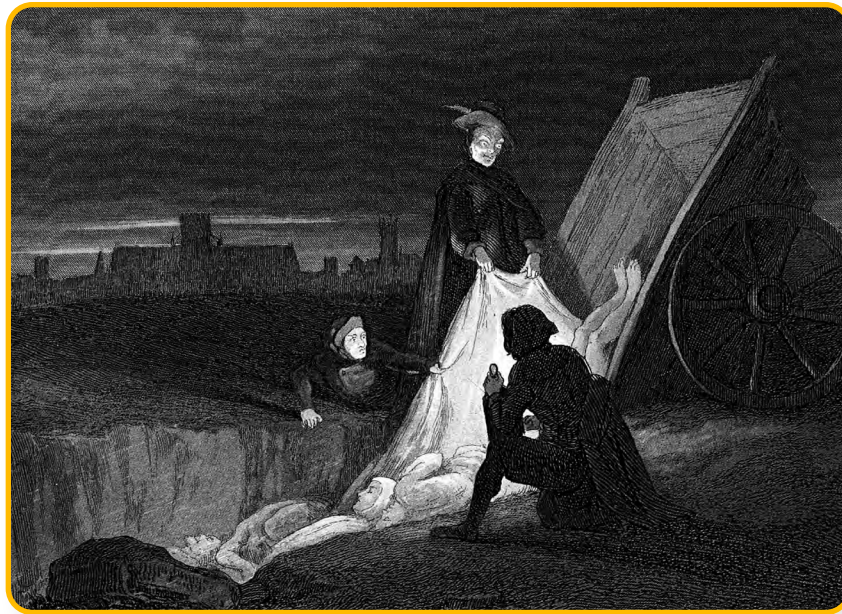
Plague reached Sicily in 1347; North Africa, mainland Italy, Spain, England, and France in 1348; Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Germany, and the Low Countries in 1349; and Scandinavia and the Baltic lands in 1350. There were recurrences of plague in 1361–1363, 1369–1371, 1374–1375, 1390, and 1400.

Death rates from the Black Death varied from place to place. The rate of contagion was greater in the more populated towns than in the countryside. Even people with wealth and power were infected. Whole communities and families were annihilated.

The death rate was especially high in monastic communities. Plague spread rapidly through monasteries because monks lived in close contact with one another. Monasteries received many visitors ranging from royal delegations to poor pilgrims, offering many chances for disease to enter the community. Although monks took good care of the sick, they could only do so much to combat an illness as contagious as plague. The Black Death wiped out whole monasteries. Others, with only a few survivors, shut their doors. Historians have estimated that monasteries in England lost about half of their residents during the epidemic.



A town crier calls on the people to “bring out your dead” in a medieval street scene from the time of the Black Death. The victims were then hauled away for burial in mass graves.



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"The Plague Pit," a mass burial of victims during the Great Plague of London (1664–1666), engraving by J. Franklin.

Priests who cared for the sick and administered last rites to the dying were also very vulnerable. As the disease took the lives of **clergy**, there were not enough priests to tend to the dying. Pope Clement VI responded by granting forgiveness of sins to everyone who died of the Black Death. He also declared that the dying could make their final confessions to anyone and still achieve salvation. Before that, only clergy could perform last rites.

The study of contemporary archives suggests that the death rates varied in the different regions between one-eighth and two-thirds of the population. The French chronicler Jean Froissart's statement that about one-third of Europe's population died in the epidemic may be fairly accurate. The population in England in 1400 was perhaps half what it had been 100 years earlier. In that country alone, the Black Death certainly caused the depopulation or total disappearance of about 1,000 villages. A rough estimate is that 25 million people in Europe died from plague during the Black Death. The overwhelming number of victims led to the development of a grim ritual in which the dead were collected each night and hauled off to mass graves known as "plague pits."

Responses to the Black Death

The people of the time struggled to understand the catastrophe they faced. Medieval medicine was not advanced enough to determine the causes of the Black Death or to prevent it. In keeping with **prevailing** theories of the Middle Ages, doctors turned to astrology and superstition in their attempts to explain the disease. They could provide only ineffective treatments such as herbs and bloodletting.



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Flagellants in the Netherlands scourging themselves in atonement, believing that the Black Death is a punishment from God for their sins, 1349.

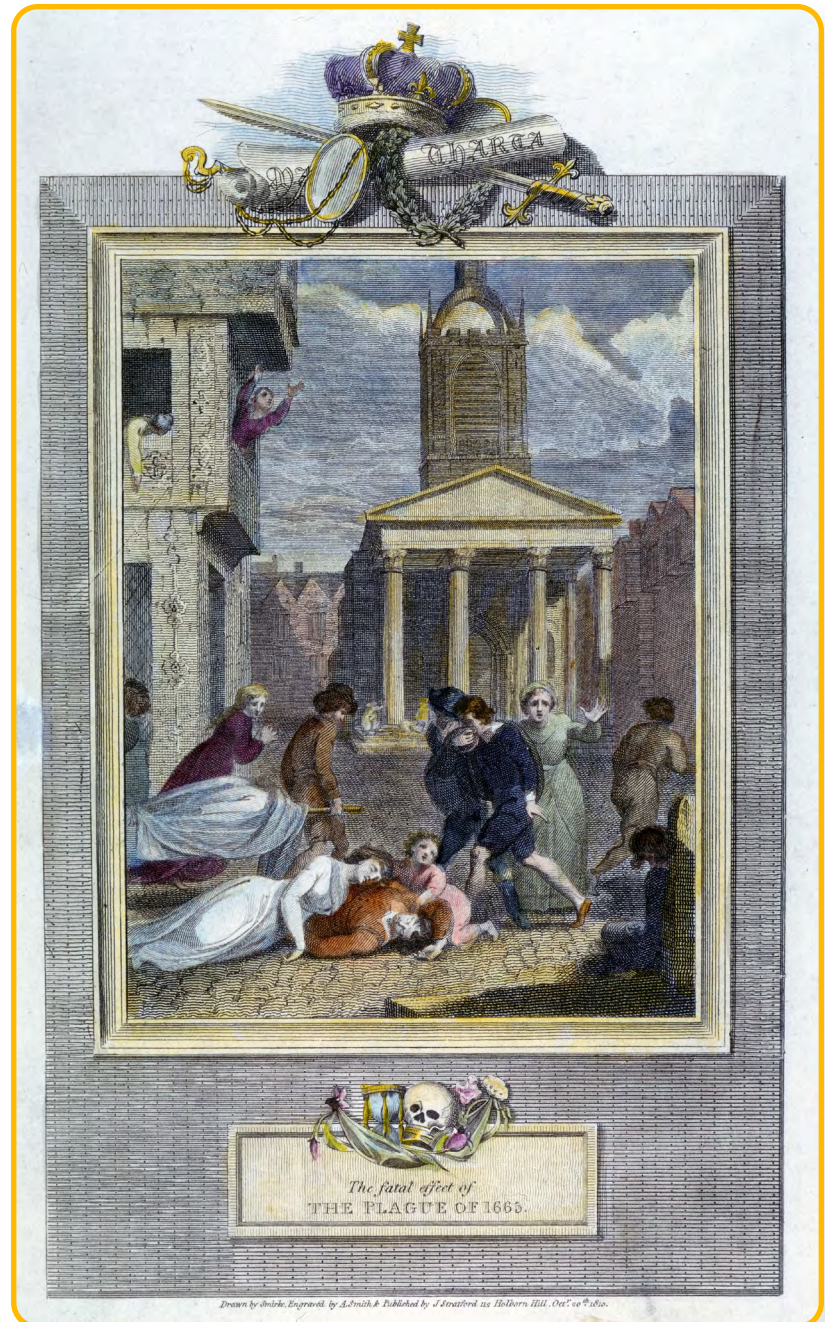
Some people considered the disease to be an expression of God's wrath. In an effort to appease God, people known as flagellants held **processions** throughout Europe in which they whipped themselves while praying for forgiveness. Other people devised conspiracy theories in which the Jews were poisoning wells to harm Christians. Such **antisemitism** led to deadly attacks on Jewish communities in Europe.

Effects of the Epidemic

The Black Death was an **unprecedented** epidemic that brought about many consequences. In the short term, wars stopped and trade slumped. A more lasting consequence was the drastic reduction of the labor force. The shortage of labor proved to be the ruin of many landowners. Hired laborers began to demand higher wages and better food. Peasant tenants, also fewer in number, asked for better conditions of tenure when they took up land. These changes began to blur the lines between the social classes. The English government's attempt to set maximum wages during the labor shortage led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Another lasting consequence of the Black Death was a decline in the status of the Roman Catholic Church. Many people lost trust in the church because it couldn't stop the plague. They began turning to new religious groups or mystical practices for guidance.

In some areas the psychological effects of the Black Death were reflected by a preoccupation with death and the afterlife, as displayed in poetry, sculpture, and painting.



A scene of death and despair in a London street during the plague outbreak of 1664–1666, which killed more than 70,000 people.

Term	Definition
clergy	
prevailing	
processions	
antisemitism	
unprecedented	

1. What is plague, and how does it spread?

2. What was the Black Death, and what caused it to spread across Europe?

3. What were the effects of the Black Death?

The Black Death Answer Key

Term	Definition
clergy	<i>people (such as priests) who are the leaders of a religion and who perform religious services</i>
prevailing	<i>usual, common, or popular</i>
processions	<i>organized groups or lines of people or vehicles that move together slowly as part of a ceremony</i>
antisemitism	<i>hatred of Jewish people</i>
unprecedented	<i>not done or experienced before</i>

1. What is plague, and how does it spread?

*Plague is an infectious disease that is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. The three types of plague are bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. It can spread from rodents to humans through infected fleas and, in the case of pneumonic plague, from person to person through droplets from coughs or sneezes. People infected with plague may experience fever, inflamed lymph glands, or black spots on the skin.*

2. What was the Black Death, and what caused it to spread across Europe?

The Black Death was a disease outbreak that happened from 1347 to 1351. It spread quickly because poor sanitation in medieval cities allowed rats and fleas to thrive. Overcrowding facilitated the disease's easy spread from person to person. Plague was also used as a weapon and spread through maritime routes.

3. What were the effects of the Black Death?

The Black Death resulted in a significant decline in population, with an estimated death toll of 25 million people in Europe. One effect is that it led workers to demand better conditions. The Black Death also led to a decrease in the influence of the Roman Catholic Church.