

Why the Black Death? (from history.com)

The Black Death arrived in Europe by sea in October 1347 when 12 Genoese trading ships docked at the Sicilian port of Messina after a long journey through the Black Sea. The people who gathered on the docks to greet the ships were met with a horrifying surprise: Most of the sailors aboard the ships were dead, and those who were still alive were gravely ill. They were overcome with fever, unable to keep food down and delirious from pain. Strangest of all, they were covered in mysterious black boils that oozed blood and pus and gave their illness its name: the "Black Death." The Sicilian authorities hastily ordered the fleet of "death ships" out of the harbor, but it was too late: Over the next five years, the mysterious Black Death would kill more than 20 million people in Europe—almost one-third of the continent's population.

"The Black Death"

Even before the "death ships" pulled into port at Messina, many Europeans had heard rumors about a "Great Pestilence" that was carving a deadly path across the trade routes of the Near and Far East. (Early in the 1340s, the disease had struck China, India, Persia, Syria and Egypt.) However, they were scarcely equipped for the horrible reality of the Black Death. "In men and women alike," the Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio wrote, "at the beginning of the malady, certain swellings, either on the groin or under the armpits...waxed to the bigness of a common apple, others to the size of an egg, some more and some less, and these the vulgar named plague-boils." Blood and pus seeped out of these strange swellings, which were followed by a host of other unpleasant symptoms—fever, chills, vomiting, diarrhea, terrible aches and pains—and then, in short order, death. The Black Death was terrifyingly, indiscriminately contagious: "the mere touching of the clothes," wrote Boccaccio, "appeared to itself to communicate the malady to the toucher." The disease was also terrifyingly efficient. People who were perfectly healthy when they went to bed at night could be dead by morning.

Understanding the Black Death

Today, scientists understand that the Black Death, now known as the plague, is spread by a bacillus called *Yersinia pestis*. (The French biologist Alexandre Yersin discovered this germ at the end of the 19th century.) They know that the bacillus travels from person to person pneumonically, or through the air, as well as through the bite of infected fleas and rats. Both of these pests could be found almost everywhere in medieval Europe, but they were particularly at home aboard ships of all kinds—which is how the deadly plague made its way through one European port city after another. Not long after it struck Messina, the Black Death spread to the port of Marseilles in France and the port of Tunis in North Africa. Then it reached Rome and Florence, two cities at the center of an elaborate web of trade routes. By the middle of 1348, the Black Death had struck Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon and London.

Today, this grim sequence of events is terrifying but comprehensible. In the middle of the 14th century, however, there seemed to be no rational explanation for it. No one knew exactly how the Black Death was transmitted from one patient to another—according to one doctor, for example, "instantaneous death occurs when the aerial spirit escaping from the eyes of the sick man strikes the healthy person

standing near and looking at the sick"—and no one knew how to prevent or treat it. Physicians relied on crude and unsophisticated techniques such as bloodletting and boil-lancing (practices that were dangerous as well as unsanitary) and superstitious practices such as burning aromatic herbs and bathing in rosewater or vinegar.

Meanwhile, in a panic, healthy people did all they could to avoid the sick. Doctors refused to see patients; priests refused to administer last rites. Shopkeepers closed stores. Many people fled the cities for the countryside, but even there they could not escape the disease: It affected cows, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens as well as people. In fact, so many sheep died that one of the consequences of the Black Death was a European wool shortage. And many people, desperate to save themselves, even abandoned their sick and dying loved ones. "Thus doing," Boccaccio wrote, "each thought to secure immunity for himself."

God's Punishment?

Because they did not understand the biology of the disease, many people believed that the Black Death was a kind of divine punishment—retribution for sins against God such as greed, blasphemy, heresy, fornication and worldliness. By this logic, the only way to overcome the plague was to win God's forgiveness. Some people believed that the way to do this was to purge their communities of heretics and other troublemakers—so, for example, many thousands of Jews were massacred in 1348 and 1349. (Thousands more fled to the sparsely populated regions of Eastern Europe, where they could be relatively safe from the rampaging mobs in the cities.)

Some people coped with the terror and uncertainty of the Black Death epidemic by lashing out at their neighbors; others coped by turning inward and fretting about the condition of their own souls. Some upper-class men joined processions of flagellants that traveled from town to town and engaged in public displays of penance and punishment: They would beat themselves and one another with heavy leather straps studded with sharp pieces of metal while the townspeople looked on. For 33 1/2 days, the flagellants repeated this ritual three times a day. Then they would move on to the next town and begin the process over again. Though the flagellant movement did provide some comfort to people who felt powerless in the face of inexplicable tragedy, it soon began to worry the Pope, whose authority the flagellants had begun to usurp. In the face of this papal resistance, the movement disintegrated.

The Black Death epidemic had run its course by the early 1350s, but the plague reappeared every few generations for centuries. Modern sanitation and public-health practices have greatly mitigated the impact of the disease but have not eliminated it.

Corrected Response: Does it frighten you to know that the Black Death still kills people today, in small areas in remote places? Give two reasons from the text why it does or does not.

The Black Death

By Sharon Fabian



1. A frightening rumor was spreading across Europe in 1347. It was told in horrifying detail by travelers returning from the East.

2. According to the rumor, a mysterious force was killing people. It wasn't like any ordinary disease. A person hardly had time to become sick, and before you knew it, he was gone. And as if that wasn't bad enough, this mysterious killer disposed of its victims in a most grisly manner. There were reports of bodies exploding with the foul sickness. Victims, as soon as they began to feel sick, reportedly gave off such a stench that no one would go near them.

3. Were the reports true? What was this mysterious killer? And what made it spread?

4. People in medieval Europe soon found out the answer to the first question. The reports were true. An unknown but gruesome sickness was spreading across Europe, and it was taking the lives of its victims. The plague spread gradually, making its way across Europe at the rate of a few miles each day.

5. As the plague spread, peasants abandoned their villages and began to flee, just as they would if an invading army was approaching.

6. What about the second question? What was this horrible killer? Scholars blamed the pestilence on a combination of the earthquakes that had shaken the continent around that time and the forces of astrology. They hypothesized that storms created by an unusual alignment of the planets had spread the evil forces released by the earthquakes.

7. Before they could continue their investigations, many of the scholars were also struck down by the plague.

NAME: _____

DATE: _____

PER: _____

In the eleven boxes below, write a synonym or definition for each underlined word or phrase

* The plague was actually a contagious disease like the flu.

* Medieval men and women didn't know what we know today - that diseases are spread by germs.

* The plague was spread from Asia to Europe, and then across Europe, by passing germs. It seems that the germs had lived on rats for many years. Fleas that lived on the rats could pass the germs from one creature to another. After some of the infected rats made their way to Europe in the cargo hold of a trading ship, the fleas began to bite, not just other rats, but people too.

* The flea bite passed the plague germs into a person's bloodstream. It caused symptoms that we all recognize from milder flues that are common today - headaches, chills, fever, nausea. But the Black Death didn't stop there. The form called the bubonic plague, probably the most common one, caused large swellings to appear at the site of the flea bite, often in an enclosed area of the body such as an armpit. These swellings, filled with infection, turned black and became as large as an egg. Soon, they burst open. Soon after that, the person died.

* The Black Death was a painful way to die. It was also disgusting: an infected person smelled so bad that no one would go near him. As a result, a sick person became an outcast, and often, no one would care for him.

* People tried to control the epidemic. They burned down houses and even whole villages infected by the plague, but their efforts had little effect.

* The plague had arrived in Europe in 1347, and by 1348, it had made its way across the whole continent to England. Within a few years, about 25 million people had died. Twenty to thirty percent of Europe had been wiped out. After all of the invasions and wars that had killed so many people in the Middle Ages, the flu known as the Black Death turned out to be the biggest killer of all.

Fill in the circle of the best answer for each of the multiple choice questions below.

- The first reports of the Black Death came from _____.
 A) Doctors in medieval hospitals
 B) Monks
 C) Farmers
 D) Travelers who had been to the East
- The Black Death was spread by _____.
 A) Food
 B) Germs
 C) Chemicals
 D) Plants
- Once people realized that the plague was spreading across Europe, they began to _____.
 A) Call their doctors
 B) Flee
 C) Take medicine
 D) Sleep
- The Black Death lasted for _____ years.
 A) A few
 B) 20
 C) 50
 D) Many
- Another name for the Black Death is _____.
 A) Cancer
 B) Plague
 C) Pneumonia
 D) Radiation
- The plague killed about _____ of the population of Europe.
 A) Half
 B) 1/20
 C) 1/4
 D) 100%
- _____ were the carriers that passed the plague germs from rats to humans.
 A) Fleas
 B) Mosquitoes
 C) Mice
 D) Dogs
- _____ blamed the plague on earthquakes and astrology.
 A) Scholars
 B) Doctors
 C) Sailors
 D) Peasants

If the people of the Middle Ages had understood that contagious diseases were spread by germs, what are two things they might have done differently to slow the spread of the plague?

Mark the three statements below to indicate if it is the Main Idea ("M"), too narrow ("N") or too broad ("B").

During the Middle Ages in Europe, people were affected by many different diseases.

The Bubonic Plague caused much suffering and death in Europe during the Middle Ages.

People suffering from Bubonic Plague often had swellings that turned black and burst open.

Complete the analogies:

- Infected fleas: black death :: cigarette smoking : _____
- Bubonic Plague : 1300s :: _____ : 2000s
- Bubonic Plague : Swellings that burst :: Flu : _____
- Burning houses and villages : Bubonic Plague :: Vaccinations : _____

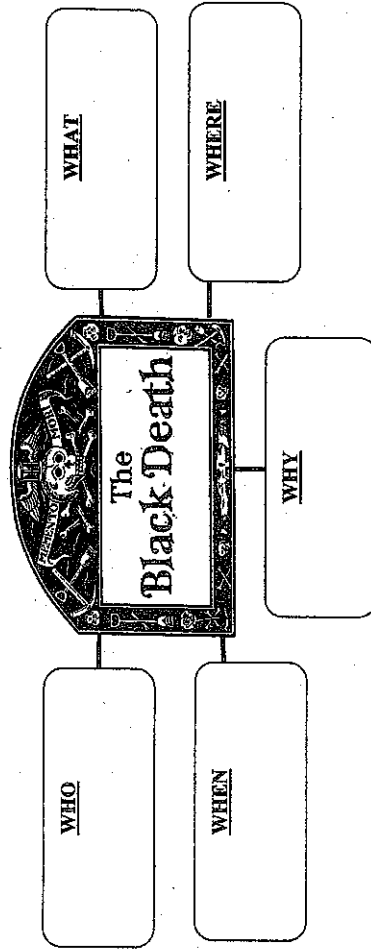
Write a simile about the Black Death:

The Black Death was like _____

Write a metaphor about the Black Death:

The Black Death _____

Complete the Graphic Organizer. List two facts in each box.



Reaction to the Black Death

FROM <http://history.howstuffworks.com/historical-events/black-death2.htm>

Quarantines

Because no one was quite sure how the Black Death was spreading, many simply chose to avoid anyone with symptoms. Some towns built pestilence houses, where the sick could be taken to die. Others boarded up entire houses as soon as someone inside took ill. Those who could afford to do so fled to the countryside.

Venice began the practice of isolating ships until it could be determined that no one on board was sick. Holding periods started at 30 days, but when it was determined that wasn't long enough, the wait lengthened to 40 days, or "quaranti giorni" in Italian. While unofficial isolation measures had been used in the past, the Venetian guidelines provided us with the word "quarantine."



Because the physicians blamed the Black Death on an evil, polluted fog, logical recommendations to prevent the fever involved avoiding these **miasmas**, or corruptions of air.

Fires were a popular method of warding off miasmas. They were burned at street corners; even the pope sat between two large fires. People were urged to burn aromatic woods, but other scents would do as well, including rosemary, amber, musk and fragrant flowers. When they walked, people took their scents with them, carrying packets of herbs. Some plague-proofed their homes by putting glazes over the southern windows to block the polluted southern wind. People were advised not to eat meat or figs and to avoid activities that would open the pores to a miasma, including bathing, exercising and physical intimacy. Stranger recommendations circulated as well, including not sleeping during the daytime and avoiding sad thoughts about death and disease.

Many medieval tracts address how to avoid sickness, but we know very little about how medieval doctors tried to cure the disease. It's possible they believed nothing could be done. Most medieval cures involved bloodletting, which was an attempt to draw poison out of the body. And we know some physicians tried to rupture and drain the buboes.

But many people instead turned to the church for a cure, praying that God would end the great pestilence. Religious reactions took two extreme forms: the rise of the flagellants and the persecution of Jews.

Procession of the flagellants

The Brotherhood of the Flagellants had appeared earlier in Europe, but rose up in great numbers in Germany in late 1348. They believed the Black Death was the punishment of God and took it upon themselves to try to appease him. The Flagellants marched barefoot throughout Europe, whipping themselves with **scourges**, or sticks with spiked tails. Enormous crowds gathered to watch the ritual beatings, complete with hymns and prayers for God's forgiveness. The pope was initially tolerant of the movement, but he denounced them in 1349, and the Flagellants disappeared, seemingly overnight.

The Flagellants were also extremely anti-Semitic, but they weren't the only ones. While anti-Semitism was already on the rise in Europe, it reached a fever pitch when many came to believe that Jews were poisoning the wells and causing the Black Death. Because Jews at this time usually lived apart from Christians in separate quarters, they were in effect already quarantined when the Black Death hit the towns, so they had high survival rates.

Vengeful Christians burned Jews at the stake or set buildings filled with entire communities on fire. Some Jews responded by setting their own homes on fire before the angry mobs did it for them. Others converted to Christianity on the spot to save themselves. While the attacks on Jews were widespread throughout Europe, some of the highest casualties were in Germany. Few Jews were left in that country by the time the plague ended.

