

# Black Death



by Janet Callahan

In 1347, a deadly disease swept across Europe. People did not know what caused it. They did not know how to treat it, either. As a result, 25 million people died within five years. About 40 percent of Europe's population was wiped out.

This terrible disease became known as the Black Death. This name suggests the fear that gripped Europe as the disease spread. It also describes the disease's most unmistakable sign: the black or dark purple spots that appeared on victims' bodies before they died.



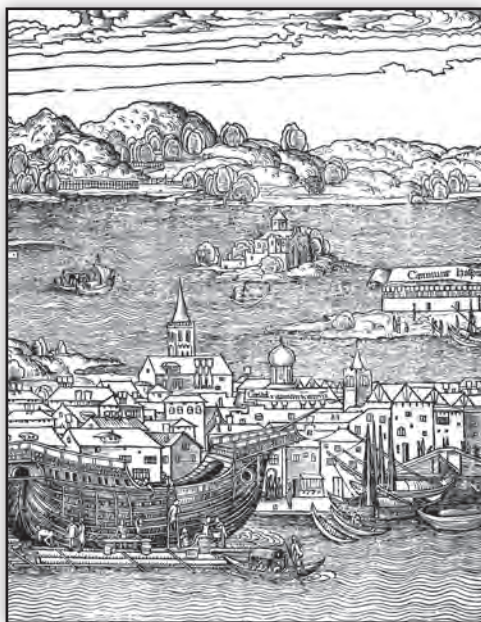
*Plaque displayed in Weymouth, England*



*Flea*  
(actual size = 1/16 inch,  
or about 1.5 mm)

Most experts believed the Black Death was caused by a germ called *Yersinia pestis*. In 2011, scientists studying centuries-old skeletons confirmed that the experts were right about this germ. The germ lived in the bodies of fleas that attached themselves to rats. In the 1300s, rats were a part of everyday life in the cities and villages of Europe. They lived in streets and alleys. They lived in people's homes. Infected fleas that bit people passed the disease on to them. People could also catch the disease by coming in close contact with someone who had already fallen ill.

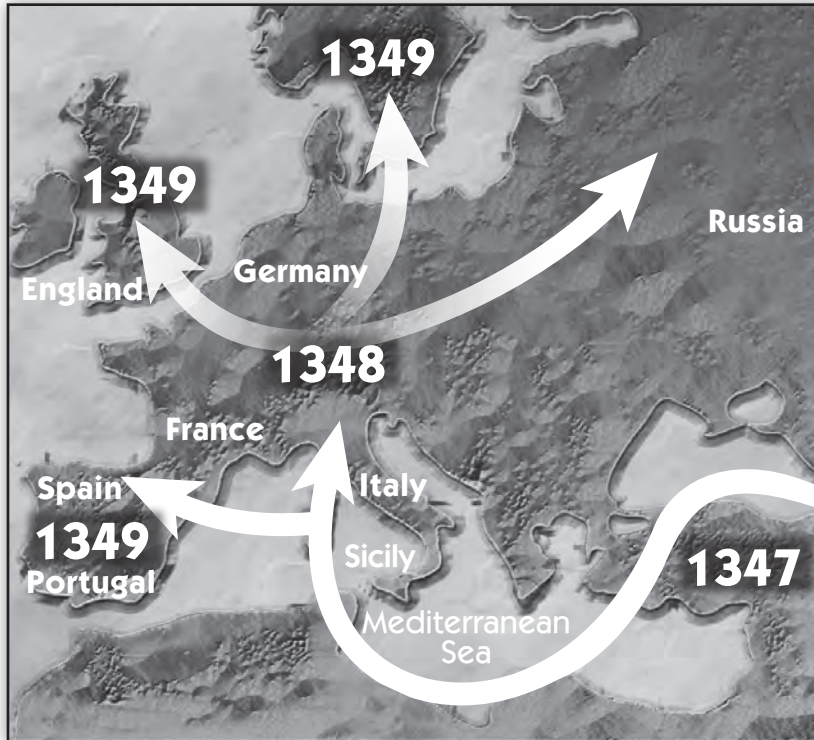
Historians have studied how Black Death germs arrived in Europe. Many believe the flea-ridden rats came from China to Europe on trade ships. Why do they think so? They know that just a few years before the Black Death struck Europe, the same deadly disease broke out in China. Historians think that the flea-ridden rats got aboard European trade ships that visited Chinese ports. When the ships returned to Europe, they brought the rats—and the disease—with them.



*Arrival of European trade ships*

There is a convincing piece of evidence for this theory. It is an account of an eyewitness from Sicily, an island in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Italy. According to this account, a fleet of trade ships arrived in Sicily in October 1347. Many of the ships' crewmen were already dead when the ships docked. Many more were sick with the disease. When the people of Sicily realized that the Black Death had reached their shores, they ordered the ships out of the harbor. This action came too late to save the people of Sicily, however.

## *The Spread of Black Death in Europe, 1347–1350*



Within days, Sicilians began to come down with the disease. Before long, the Black Death reached other cities along the Mediterranean coast. Historical documents record that the disease spread inland with terrifying speed. It spread through France, Germany, Spain, and Portugal. It moved on to the British Isles and Scandinavia. It even reached the island of Greenland, near the North Pole, almost wiping out its population.

People felt helpless in the face of such a deadly disease.

Although they did not know how to prevent the Black Death, they were willing to try almost anything. Some people washed walls and furniture and even their bodies with rose water or vinegar. Others tried to ward off the illness by wearing garlands of flowers. Many people believed they could stay healthy if they did not eat, drink, or exercise too much.

None of these precautions worked. Although a tiny fraction of people who fell ill with the disease were able to recover, most died within a week after their first symptoms appeared. The Black Death began with fever and chills. Before long, swellings appeared on the victim's neck and armpits. These swellings were called "buboes," and the disease is often referred to as bubonic plague. The swellings quickly spread over the entire body. Finally, the black or purple spots appeared, signaling that death was very near.

People who practiced medicine in the 1300s did not know much about diseases or how to treat them. The Black Death was often treated with a warm preparation of butter, onion, and garlic applied to the skin, but it did not help. The most popular remedy of the time was bloodletting, or leeching. In this treatment, the doctor tried to get rid of a disease by taking blood from the patient's body. But this procedure had no effect on the Black Death.

The fear and panic that came with the Black Death was almost as destructive as the death toll. When the Black Death struck a town or village, those who were still healthy often fled for their lives. In the blink of an eye, a town would be left without its shop owners, craftsmen, and other workers. In this way, the Black Death wiped out whole communities.

By 1351, the Black Death had mostly vanished from Europe. In the next 150 years, there would be several more outbreaks

of the disease, but none was as bad as the first. Yet fearful memories of the disease's first wave lingered for many years before Europeans finally believed that they had put the Black Death behind them for good.



*Medical treatment included the use of leeches to remove “bad” blood from patients.*