



# The Bubonic Plague

Anderson et al (2005) RetroActive1 Wiley & Sons  
Delaney College Stage 4 Medieval History Unit  
[http://www.themiddleages.net/images/black\\_death.jpg](http://www.themiddleages.net/images/black_death.jpg)

Bubonic Plague - \_\_\_\_\_

Disease - \_\_\_\_\_

Apothecary - \_\_\_\_\_

People in medieval Europe had different habits of personal hygiene to us. Peasants had baths only once or twice a year. Wealthy people might bathe more frequently as they had servants to heat and carry the water from the kitchen stove to the bathtub. The wealthy could also afford the public sweating-rooms found in large cities like Paris. These rooms had separate bathing areas for men and women and provided steam baths or, for a higher price, a wooden bathtub of water. In medieval times there were no local councils to set rules and regulations about town planning or hygiene issues. There were no garbage collections or sewerage systems either. Rubbish and human waste were both thrown into the streets. During heavy rains mud and filth would flow in rivers and creeks, which were also the source of drinking water. Rats were a common problem and fleas were frequently found in people's clothing and bedding. The medieval world was therefore an environment in which diseases could thrive.

## EATING DISEASES

In medieval Europe, people looked to God to save them from diseases they did not yet know how to cure by any other means. People in our own time still express this idea when they say 'bless you' when someone sneezes.

Few people really understood either what disease was or how it spread from one person to another. People used leeches to suck the 'bad' blood from someone's veins and laughed at people who displayed symptoms of mental illness. They did not know about germs or how cleanliness, sanitation and sterilising medical equipment could prevent their spread. Patients who underwent operations risked death from both infection passed on through unsterilised medical instruments and the shock of the pain that had to be endured in a world without anaesthetics.

## THE BLACK DEATH

The bubonic plague, or 'Black Death', was one of the most disastrous events of the medieval period. Between 25 and 30 million Europeans died over the four years from 1347 to 1351. During the thirteenth century, the population of Europe increased rapidly, but people were unable to increase food production at the same rate. Changes in weather conditions (known as the Little Ice Age) from the early fourteenth century caused poor harvests and sometimes famine. People became ill easily because they did not have enough food. Those who caught a serious illness had little chance of survival. At this time, 'the plague' broke out in Europe.

### How the plague spread

The plague began in China in the 1320s. It infected Europeans in 1347 as a result of the Mongol siege of the port of Caffa. Caffa was defended by merchants and sailors from the Italian town of Genoa. The Genoese were defeated, but were able to continue their trade. They brought the plague with them when they returned to Europe. When it became known that the Genoese sailors were infected with the plague, their ships were greeted with burning arrows and refused entry into any Italian ports. The French, unaware of the danger, allowed the ships to berth at their port of Marseilles.

Over the next four years, the plague spread inland throughout most of the cities, towns and villages of western Europe. English soldiers on leave from the Hundred Years War carried the disease with them back to England in 1348.

## Symptoms and treatments

People at the time described a range of plague symptoms, including vomiting, coughing up blood, and the growth of large, painful, itchy blue-black tumours ('buboes') in the groin and armpits. These buboes gradually spread over the entire body and emitted blood, pus and horrible smells. The victim usually died within three to five days of the appearance of the initial symptoms.

Doctors and apothecaries could not cure the plague because they did not really understand the cause of it. They used treatments, which they used for most other illnesses. Many doctors believed that all disease resulted from bad smells. They prescribed posies of herbs or pleasant-smelling crushed flowers, which the patient would sniff by means of a nosebag.

Some doctors advised their patients to inhale the smells of human waste in the belief that one bad smell would counteract the effect of another. The most famous doctor in Europe, Guy de Chauliac, made the Pope sit in a smoke-filled room in the hope of avoiding the plague.

Doctors also used the popular medieval treatment of 'bleeding' the patient. They attached leeches to key veins, chosen according to guidance from astrology. Doctors also cut into the buboes to remove what was thought to be the 'bad' blood within them. Then they covered the cuts with a herbal ointment. Nothing worked. Despite covering their noses with cloths soaked in vinegar while treating plague victims, many doctors died before their patients.

## Coping with the plague years

The wealthy obtained a temporary escape from the plague by moving away from an infected area. People who believed that the plague was God's way of punishing their swearing and gambling took to prayer and pilgrimages to holy places. The most famous group hoping to please God, and so avoid the plague, was the Flagellants. They travelled from town to town, whipping themselves with strips of leather tipped with iron spikes. The Pope eventually banned the movement and many Flagellants were executed.

People also depicted the plague in plays and nursery rhymes. The *danse macabre* was a play performed throughout Europe. The actors dressed as skeletons representing people from all classes and danced a dance of death.

## Death and burial

During the plague years, there was often neither the time nor the people to carry out the rituals linked with death and dying. About 40 per cent of priests died. Others ran away. There was no-one to hear a final confession, ring the death bell, or conduct a proper funeral service.

People boarded up the houses of plague victims, and painted a red cross on them. No-one was allowed out until the nightly corpse collection took place. Criminals or poor people earned money by doing this work. Towns sometimes left bodies to rot in the streets, or buried them so hastily that they were easy prey for animals.

## The changing world

The Black Death had a dramatic effect on life in medieval Europe. About one-third of the European population died from the plague.

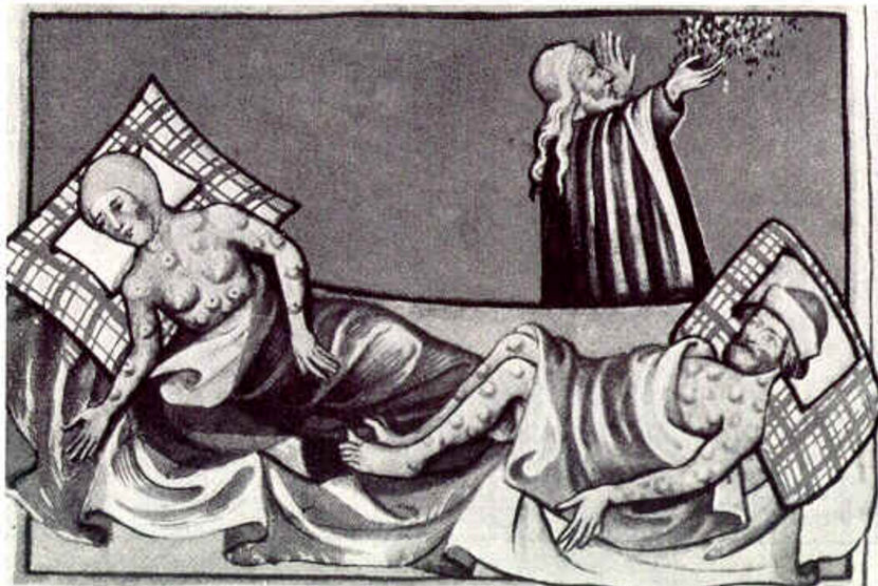
In some districts there were few landlords or labourers left to look after the farms. The shortage of workers also meant that survivors could bargain for better wages. The feudal economy was beginning to change.

The plague also affected people's attitudes towards the wealthy and powerful. People lost their respect for both the Church and doctors, because neither could control the crisis. Poor people became angry when the rich abandoned the towns and manors to look after their own safety. In England, this anger built on other grievances, and eventually erupted in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Jewish people also became a target of people's anger, and thousands were tortured or massacred throughout Europe.

The Plague left Europe in 1351, but returned at least once a decade for the next 150 years.

# The Black Death (Bubonic Plague)

1. Where did the Black Death come from?
2. When did it spread to Europe and how many people died?
3. How was the Black Death spread?
4. What were the symptoms of the Black Death.
5. List the 'treatments' for the Black Death (mention some of the things they thought caused the Black Death too).
6. Why did it spread so quickly (HINT: consider the hygiene habits of people in those days).
7. Who were the Flagellants?



8. Explain why the Black Death had such a dramatic effect on Medieval Europe. Include 3 effects.
9. You need to draw an outline of a body. Label and list FOUR of the symptoms of the plague.
10. Design a poster to warn people about the plague! Include symptoms and how to avoid getting the disease.

