

## Bubonic Plague

The Black Death erupted in the Gobi Desert in the late 1320s. No one really knows why. The plague bacillus was alive and active long before that; indeed Europe itself had suffered an epidemic in the 6th century. But the disease had lain relatively dormant in the succeeding centuries. We know that the climate of Earth began to cool in the 14th century, and perhaps this so-called little Ice Age had something to do with it.

Whatever the reason, we know that the outbreak began there and spread outward. While it did go west, it spread in every direction, and the Asian nations suffered as cruelly as anywhere. In China, for example, the population dropped from around 125 million to 90 million over the course of the 14thc. The plague moved along the caravan routes toward the West. By 1345 the plague was on the lower Volga River. By 1346 it was in the Caucasus and the Crimea. By 1347 it was in Constantinople. It hit Alexandria in the autumn of that year, and by spring 1348, a thousand people a day were dying there. In Cairo the count was seven times that. The disease travelled by ship as readily as by land—more readily—and it was no sooner in the eastern Mediterranean than it was in the western end as well. Already in 1347, the plague had hit Sicily.

What was this disease? Bubonic plague is the medical term. It is a bacillus, an organism, most usually carried by rodents. Fleas infest the animal (rats, but other rodents as well), and these fleas move freely over to human hosts. Symptoms include high fevers and aching limbs and vomiting of blood. Most characteristic is a swelling of the lymph nodes. These glands can be found in the neck, armpits and groin. The swelling protrudes and is easily visible; its blackish coloring gives the disease its name: the Black Death.

The plague came to Europe in the fall of 1347. In the space of two years, one out of every three people was dead. Nothing like that has happened before or since. These general numbers disguise the uneven nature of the epidemic. Some areas suffered little, others suffered far more. Here are some examples. Between 45% and 75% of Florence died in a single year. One-third died in the first six months. Its entire economic system collapsed for a time. In Venice, which kept excellent records, 60% died over the course of 18 months: five hundred to six hundred a day at the height.

Long-term population loss is also instructive. Urban populations recovered quickly, in some cases within a couple of years, through immigration from the countryside because of increased opportunities in the cities. Rural population though, recovered itself slowly, for peasants left their farms for the cities.

Cities were hit hard by the plague. Financial business was disrupted as debtors died and their creditors found themselves without recourse. Construction projects stopped for a time or were abandoned altogether. Guilds lost their craftsmen and could not replace them. Mills and other special machinery might break and the one man in town who had the skill to repair it had died in the plague. We see towns advertising for specialists, offering high wages. The labor shortage was very severe, especially in the short term, and consequently, wages rose. Because of the mortality, there was an oversupply of goods, and so prices dropped. Between the two trends, the standard of living rose . . . for those still living.

Effects in the countryside were just as severe. Farms and entire villages died out or were abandoned as the few survivors decided not to stay on. The countryside, too, faced a short-term shortage of labor, and landlords stopped freeing their serfs. They tried to get more forced labor from them, as there were fewer peasants to be had. Peasants in many areas began to demand fairer treatment or lighter burdens.

Questions:

1. Why did the Bubonic Plague spread throughout the world in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century?
2. How can this been seen as a global epidemic?
3. Why were some cities more affected than others?
4. How did the Black death affect the town life? Country life?
5. Did anything “good” come out of this epidemic?