

Black Death

Long-distance trade, a key aspect of commercial revival in the high Middle Ages, brought wealth to Europe and expanded urban life. It also brought disease. Europe's relative isolation during the early Middle Ages protected it from contagious diseases. Increased contact with other parts of the world through long-distance trade ended this relative isolation. The pandemic—a disease that strikes a large area in a short amount of time—known as the Black Death appeared in the Crimea in 1347. Here, at Genoese trading stations, it was carried to Constantinople and Italy, to the North African coast, and to the Middle East. Fleas on the backs of rats carried the disease, which historians believe to be caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. It arrived in Europe in 1348, hitting ports in Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and Marseilles, from where it quickly spread through all of Italy, France, and the Balkans within six months. It then spread north to Germany, England, and into Scandinavia. This first outbreak, lasting until 1353, is called the Black Death, but the plague would continue to return every decade or so, devastating populations, as much as one third, each time. The last recorded outbreak occurred in Marseilles in 1720.

The physical effects to the body infected with the plague were immortalized the Prologue to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which the Italian author wrote in 1350. Boccaccio details the swellings, or buboes, the plague caused on the thighs and arms, appearing first in the groin and armpits. These tumors continued to spread over the body and black spots appeared. Usually within three days of the tumors' appearance, the infected person died. The first outbreak was especially potent, for it attacked a population already weakened by famine, both by the Great Famine of the early fourteenth century, and periodic and localized famines thereafter. In some places, the response was to institute quarantine, such as the city of Pistoia in Italy did in 1348. Sanitation measures, such as disallowing livestock where food was sold, were prescribed in areas. Public health commissions appeared in numerous locations with physicians, police to enforce quarantine, and gravediggers. Religious ceremonies and procession were also a key part of response to outbreak of plague. In the long term, the devastation the plague caused to the population resulted in many abandoning farms, returning land to pasture and meadow, and wealthy landowners were forced to diversify crops. The shortage of labor also put agricultural and urban workers in a better position to negotiate for higher wages and better working conditions, increasing wealth among the lowest classes. Yet amidst improved conditions, the periodic return of the plague and continued threat of another wave of devastation resulted in a preoccupation with death. Art, literature, and religious preaching all featured death as a primary theme during the period. Perhaps the best example of this preoccupation was the Dance of Death. This performance, which took place at princely courts and at churches, consisted of a procession of individuals of all ages and social stations to the grave.