



Source Collection: The Black Death

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The Black Death, or bubonic plague, hit most of Europe, southwestern and central Asia, and northern Africa in the fourteenth century. This was not the world's first epidemic, but it was one of the worst epidemics that humanity had ever experienced. Physicians and scholars at the time wrote first-hand accounts of the disease and its effects, and they also hypothesized about the causes and appropriate treatments.

Introduction to this collection

The Black Death, or bubonic plague, hit most of Europe, southwestern and central Asia, and northern Africa in the fourteenth century. This was not the world's first epidemic, but it was one of the worst epidemics that humanity had ever experienced. Physicians and scholars at the time wrote first-hand accounts of the disease and its effects, and they also hypothesized about the causes and appropriate treatments.

Also included in this source collection are secondary sources which reflect how our knowledge of the plague has changed over time. We now know that *Yersinia pestis* was to blame, but historians and other scholars debate the chronology, transmission, and incidence of the disease in different regions. You can trace these debates from primary accounts in 1348 to secondary interpretations in 2021.

Guiding question to think about as you read the documents: *How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?*

WHP Primary and Secondary Source Punctuation Key

When you read through these primary source collections, you might notice some unusual punctuation like this: ... and [] and (). Use the table below to help you understand what this punctuation means.

Punctuation	What it means
ELLIPSES words ... words	Something has been <u>removed</u> from the quoted sentences by an editor.
BRACKETS [word] or word[s]	Something has been <u>added or changed</u> by an editor. These edits are to clarify or help readers.
PARENTHESES (words)	The original author of the primary source wanted to clarify, add more detail, or make an additional comment in parentheses.

Contents

Introduction to this collection.....	2
WHP Primary and Secondary Source Punctuation Key	2
Source 1 - Ibn al-Wardi on the Plague in Asia, 1348	3
Source 2 - Account of Attack Against the Jews in Strasbourg, 1349.....	5
Source 3 - Carrying Coffins in Tournai, 1349	7
Source 4 - Boccaccio's Decameron, c. 1350	8
Source 5 - Ibn al-Khatib's Theory of Contagion, c. 1350	10
Source 6 - The Emperor of Constantinople's Account of the Plague, c. 1350.....	12
Source 7 - Woodblock from Spell of the Plague, 1482.....	14
Source 8 - The Black Death, 1964.....	16
Source 9 - The Cambridge World History of Human Disease, 1993.....	18
Source 10 - Black Death and Mongols Thematic Map, 2021	20
Source 11 - Rewriting the Black Death, 2021	21
Source 12 - Mystery of Black Death's origins solved, 2022.....	23

Source 1 - Ibn al-Wardi on the Plague in Asia, 1348

Title

An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence

Source type

Primary source – essay

Date and location

1348, Syria

Author

Abū Ḥafs Zayn al-Dīn 'Umar ibn al-Muẓaffar Ibn al-Wardī (1290–1349)

Description

Ibn al-Wardī was an Arab historian and geographer. He described his experiences and observations of the plague in Syria in 1348. He himself died of the plague after writing the essay excerpted below. In his essay, Ibn al-Wardī also discussed the plague's effects in China, which is one of the only records we have that describes the plague in East Asia. He spoke with merchants who claimed to have traveled to the east who told him about the plague infecting this region. There is, however, a debate as to when the plague began in China. New research has shown that there was an epidemic in the thirteenth century during the Mongol conquest of northern China. There is limited evidence that the fourteenth-century plague dramatically affected China. The fourteenth century was a period of transition and civil war in China and documentary evidence is difficult to confirm.

Key vocabulary

adversity

inclination

ensnared

martyrdom

stilled

rebuke

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

God is my security in every adversity. My sufficiency is in God alone. Is not God sufficient protection for His servant? Oh God, pray for our master, Muhammad, and give him peace. Save us for his sake from the attacks of the plague and give us shelter. The plague frightened and killed. It began in the land of darkness [northern Asia]. Oh, what a visitor: it has been current for fifteen years. China was not preserved from it, nor could the strongest fortress hinder it. The plague afflicted the Indians in India. It weighed upon the Sind [modern-day Pakistan]. It seized with its hand and ensnared even the lands of the Uzbeks. How many backs did it break in what is Transoxiana [central Asia]! The plague increased and spread further. It attacked the Persians . . . The plague destroyed mankind in Cairo. Its eye was cast upon Egypt, and behold, the people were wide awake. It stilled all movement in Alexandria . . . Have patience with the fate of the plague, which leaves of seventy men only seven . . .

We ask God's forgiveness for our souls' bad inclination; the plague is surely part of His punishment . . . They said: the air's corruption kills; I said: the love of corruption kills. How many sins and how many offenses does the crier call our attention to? . . . This plague is for the Muslims a martyrdom and a reward, and for the disbelievers a punishment and a rebuke. When the Muslim endures misfortune, then patience is his worship. It has been established by our Prophet, God bless him and give him peace, that the plague-stricken are martyrs . . . If someone says it causes infection and destruction, say: God creates and recreates. If the liar disputes the matter of infection and tries to find an explanation, I say that the Prophet, on him be peace, said: who infected the first? If we acknowledge the plague's devastation of the people, it is the will of the Chosen Doer. So it happened again and again.

Citation

Ibn al-Wardi, Abu Hafis Umar. "Risālah al-Naba' 'an al-Waba': An Essay on the Report of the Pestilence (1348)." Quoted in *The Black Death* by Joseph P. Byrne, 173–6. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Notes or additional materials

For more information about this debate see Sussman, George D. "Was the Black Death in India and China?" *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 85, no. 3 (2011): 319–355 and Hymes, Robert. "Epilogue: A Hypothesis on the East Asian Beginnings of the *Yersinia pestis* Polytomy." In *Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death*, edited by Monica Green, 285–308. Kalamazoo: Arc Medieval Press, 2015.

Source 2 - Account of Attack Against the Jews in Strasbourg, 1349

Title

The Cremation of Strasbourg Jewry St. Valentine's Day, February 14, 1349

Source type

Primary source – chronicle

Date and location

1349, Imperial City of Strasbourg

Author

Jacob Königshofen (1346–1420)

Description

This chronicle was most likely written by the German chronicler Jacob Königshofen. In it, he describes the attack on the Jews in the city of Strasbourg in the Alsace region, where there is French, German, and Swiss influence. Jews were blamed for the plague in many parts of Europe. In Strasbourg, the Jewish community was targeted by mobs in one of the first pogroms in premodern Europe. Over a thousand Jews were publicly burnt to death or expelled, and they were not permitted to live in the city for centuries afterward. In addition to unfounded fears that Jews had caused the plague, economic resentment among the Christian population spurred the attacks.

Key vocabulary

epidemic	clamor
wares	pogrom
reviled	bishop
indignation	lords

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

In the year 1349, there occurred the greatest epidemic that ever happened. Death went from one end of the earth to the other, on that side and this side of the sea, and it was greater among the [Arabs] than among the Christians. In some lands everyone died so that no one was left. Ships were also found on the sea laden with wares; the crew had all died and no one guided the ship . . . In other kingdoms and cities so many people perished that it would be horrible to describe. The pope of Avignon stopped all sessions of court, locked himself in a room, allowed no one to approach him, and had a fire burning before him all the time. And for what this epidemic came, all wise teachers and physicians could only say that it was God's will . . . This epidemic also came to Strasbourg in the summer of the above-mentioned year, and it is estimated that about sixteen thousand people died.

In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells—that is what they were accused of—and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there.

Nevertheless, they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells. Thereupon, they burnt the Jews in many towns and wrote of this affair to Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Basel in order that they too should burn their Jews. But the leaders in these three cities in whose hands the government lay did not believe that anything ought to be done to the Jews. However, in Basel the citizens marched to the city-hall and compelled the council to take an oath that they would burn the Jews and that they would allow no Jew to enter the city for the next two hundred years. Thereupon the Jews were arrested in all these places and a conference was arranged to meet at Benfeld Alsace, February 8, 1349. The Bishop of Strasbourg, all the feudal lords of Alsace, and representatives of the three above mentioned cities came there. The deputies of the city of Strasbourg were asked what they were going to do with their Jews. They answered and said that they knew no evil of them. Then they asked the Strasbourgers why they had closed the wells and put away the buckets, and there was a great indignation and clamor against the deputies from Strasbourg. So finally, the Bishop and the lords and the Imperial Cities agreed to do away with the Jews. The result was that they were burnt in many cities, and wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned.

Citation

“The Cremation of Strasbourg Jewry St. Valentine’s Day, February 14, 1349.” *Jewish History Sourcebook: The Black Death and the Jews, 1348–1349 CE*. Fordham University. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.asp>

Source 3 - Carrying Coffins in Tournai, 1349

Title

The Chronicles of Gilles Li Muisis

Source type

Primary source – illustration in a chronicle

Date and location

1349, Belgium

Author

Gilles Li Muisis (c. 1272–1352)

Description

Li Muisis was a French chronicler and poet. In 1349, in one of his chronicles, we have one of the earliest known images of the plague. It depicts people carrying coffins of the deceased in the city of Tournai. It represents the large number of coffins and the overwhelming scale of the disease.

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt



Citation

Gilles Li Muisis' chronicles. The plague at Tournai, 1349, France. Bibliothèque royale. © Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

Source 4 - Boccaccio's Decameron, c. 1350

Title

The Decameron

Source type

Primary source – short story

Date and location

c. 1350, Italy

Author

Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375)

Description

Giovanni Boccaccio was an Italian writer who lived through the ravages of the plague. His most famous work, *The Decameron*, tells the story of ten people (seven women and three men) who journeyed from Florence to the countryside to escape the plague. Along the course of their journey, each traveler tells a story to pass the time. In the “First Day” of *The Decameron*, Boccaccio provides a detailed account of people’s reactions to the plague.

Key vocabulary

forethought	naught
avert	attendant
devout	efficacy
doleful	negligent
propagate	exile
malady	supplications
infallible	pestilence
token	tincture

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the devout; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that showed as if miraculous. Not such were they as in the East, where an issue of blood from the nose was a manifest sign of inevitable death; but

in men and women alike it first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less . . . From the two said parts of the body this deadly [lump] soon began to propagate and spread itself in all directions differently; after which the form of the malady began to change, black spots or [purple] making their appearance in many cases on the arm or the thigh or elsewhere, now few and large, then minute and numerous. And as the [lump] had been and still were an infallible token of approaching death, such also were these spots on whomsoever they [showed] themselves. Which maladies seemed set entirely at naught both the art of the physician . . . whether it was that the disorder was of a nature to [able to] defy such treatment, or that the physicians were at fault—besides the qualified there was now a multitude both of men and of women who practiced without having received the slightest tincture of medical science—and, being in ignorance of its source, failed to apply the proper remedies; in either case, not merely were those that covered few, but almost all within three days from the appearance of said symptoms, sooner or later, died, and in most cases without any fever or other attendant malady . . . Some again, the most sound, perhaps, in judgment, as they were also the most harsh in temper, of all, affirmed that there was no medicine for the disease superior or equal in efficacy . . . to flight; following which prescription a multitude of men and women, negligent of all but themselves, deserted their city, their houses, their estates, their kinsfolk, their goods, and went into voluntary exile, or migrated to the country parts . . .

Citation

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*. Translated by M. Rigg. London: David Campbell, 1921, 5–11.

Source 5 - Ibn al-Khatib's Theory of Contagion, c. 1350

Title

The Satisfaction of the Questioner Regarding the Appalling Illness

Source type

Primary source – medical treatise

Date and location

c. 1350, Emirate of Grenada (modern-day Spain)

Author

Lisan Al-Din Ibn al-Khatib (1313–1374)

Description

Ibn al-Khatib was a historian and government official in Granada. He wrote down his observations and theories about the plague. Islamic teaching at the time discouraged people from fleeing to or from the plague-infected areas. Some Islamic legal and religious scholars also argued that the teachings of Muhammad discouraged the idea that a disease could be contagious—an unproven theory at the time. In this passage Ibn al-Khatib speculates on the infectious nature of the plague.

Key vocabulary

assertion

itinerant

recurring

nomads

garment

allegorically

vessel

contagion

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

If one asks “How can you admit the assertion, there is infection, when the revealed word [from Islamic teachings] denies this?” we answer that infection exists, is confirmed by experience, research, insight and observation, and through constantly recurring accounts. These are the elements of proof. For him who has treated or recognized this case, it cannot remain concealed that mostly the man who has had contact with a patient infected with this disease must die, and that, on the other hand, the man who has had no contact remains healthy. So it is with the appearance of the illness in a house or quarter because of a garment or a vessel. Even an earring can destroy him who puts it in his ear, and all the inhabitants of his house . . . There is nothing more wonderful at this time than the prison camp of the Muslims—may God free them—in the Arsenal of Seville: there were thousands but the plague did not touch them although it practically destroyed the town itself. The report is also true that the itinerant nomads living in tents in North Africa and elsewhere remained healthy because there the air is not shut in and the corruption proceeding from it could only gain a slight hold. . . .

But it belongs to principles which one may not ignore that a proof taken from tradition (Hadith), if observation and inspection are contrary, must be interpreted allegorically. In this matter it is essential that it should be interpreted in accordance with those who hold the theory of contagion.

Citation

Hopley, Russell. "Contagion in Islamic Lands: Responses from Medieval Andalusia and North Africa." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 55–6.

Source 6 - The Emperor of Constantinople's Account of the Plague, c. 1350

Title

The Emperor's History

Source type

Primary source – chronicle

Date and location

c. 1350, Constantinople

Author

Ioannes (John VI) Kantakouzenos (c.1292–1383)

Description

The following is an excerpt of a first-hand account of the plague written by the emperor of Constantinople. He abdicated his throne in 1355 and retired to a monastery. At that time, he wrote a historical chronicle of the Byzantine Empire between 1320 and 1356. In it, we find this account of the plague from around 1347–1350. He suffered personally, and his son, Andronikos, died of the plague. He describes the disease and its course.

Key vocabulary

succumbed	chastity
congested	chastened
manifest	incurable
obscure	sputum
prostration	abscesses

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

So incurable was the evil, that neither any regularity of life, nor any bodily strength could resist it. Strong and weak bodies were all similarly carried away, and those best cared for died in the same manner as the poor. No other [major] disease of any kind presented itself that year. If someone had a previous illness he always succumbed to this disease and no physician's art was sufficient; neither did the disease take the same course in all persons . . .

Sputum suffused with blood was brought up and disgusting and stinking breath from within. The throat and tongue, parched from the heat, were black and congested with blood. It made no difference if they drank much or little. Sleeplessness and weakness were established forever. Abscesses formed on the upper and lower arms . . . In some they were large and in others small. Black blisters appeared. Some people broke out with black spots all over their bodies; in some they were few and very manifest; in others they were obscure and dense. Everyone died the same death from these symptoms. In some people all the symptoms appeared, in others more or fewer of them,

and in no small number [of cases] even one of these was sufficient to provoke death. Those few who were able to escape from among the many who died, were no longer possessed by the same evil, but were safe. The disease did not attack twice in order to kill them. Great abscesses were formed on the legs or the arms, from which, when cut, a large quantity of foul-smelling pus flowed, and the disease was differentiated as that which discharged much annoying matter. Even many who were seized by all the symptoms unexpectedly recovered. There was no help from anywhere; if someone brought to another a remedy useful to himself, this became poison to the other patient. Some, by treating others, became infected with the disease. It caused great destruction and many homes were deserted by their inhabitants. Domestic animals died together with their masters. Most terrible was the discouragement. Whenever people felt sick there was no hope left for recovery, but by turning to despair, adding to their prostration, and severely aggravating their sickness, they died at once. No words could express the nature of the disease. All that can be pointed out is that it had nothing in common with the everyday evils to which the nature of man is subject but was something else sent by God to restore chastity. Many of the sick turned to better things in their minds, by being chastened, not only those who died, but also those who overcame the disease. They abstained from all vice during that time, and they lived virtuously; many divided their property among the poor, even before they were attacked by the disease. If he ever felt himself seized, no one was so ruthless as not to show repentance of his faults and to appear before the judgment seat of God with the best chance of salvation, not believing that the soul was incurable or unhealed.

Citation

Bartsocas, Christos S. "Two Fourteenth Century Greek Descriptions of the 'Black Death.'" *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 21, no. 4 (1966): 394–400.

Source 7 - Woodblock from Spell of the Plague, 1482

Title

Pest spell of the plague

Source type

Primary source – print

Date and location

1482, Germany

Author

Hans Folz (c. 1437–1513)

Description

Hans Folz was a German medieval chronicler. Below is an image of a woodblock print from Germany. It seems to be instructive and shows doctors how to lance a bubo, a swollen or inflamed node. Many doctors thought this was effective to cure the plague.

Key vocabulary

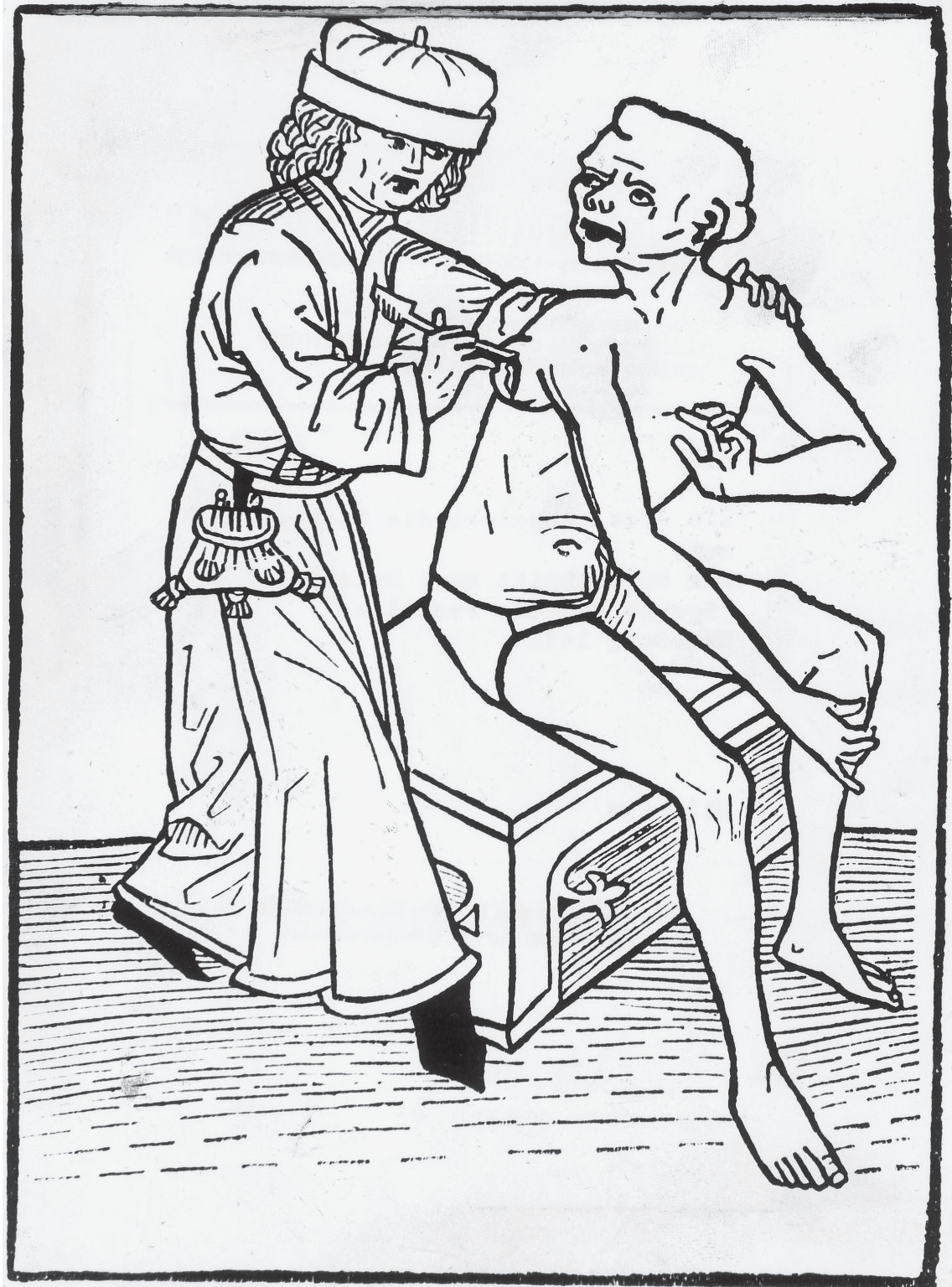
lance

bubo

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt



Citation

Plague: Doctor cuts plague bumps, 1482. © ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images.

Source 8 - The Black Death, 1964

Title

The Black Death

Source type

Secondary source – newspaper article

Date and location

1964, United States

Author

William Leonard Langer (1896–1977)

Description

Langer was an American historian, intelligence analyst, and policy advisor. He chaired the history department at Harvard University. Below is an excerpt from the popular science magazine *Scientific American* describing the Black Death.

Key vocabulary

hemorrhages	pneumonic
Crusades	bubonic
expeditions	septicemic
subsided	

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

Plague is now recognized as a well-marked disease caused by a specific organism (*Bacillus pestis*). It is known in three forms, all highly fatal: pneumonic (attacking primarily the lungs), bubonic (producing buboes, or swellings, of the lymph glands) and septicemic (killing the victim rapidly by poisoning of the blood). The disease is transmitted to man by fleas, mainly from black rats and certain other rodents, including ground squirrels. It produces high fever, agonizing pain . . . and it is usually fatal within five or six days. The Black Death got its name from dark blotches produced by hemorrhages in the skin. There had been outbreaks of plague in the Roman Empire in the sixth century and in North Africa earlier, but for some reason epidemics of the disease in Europe were comparatively rare after that until the 14th century. Some historians have suggested that the black rat was first brought to western Europe during the Crusades by expeditions returning from the Middle East. This seems unlikely: remains of the rat have been found in prehistoric sites in Switzerland, and in all probability the houses of Europe were infested with rats throughout the Middle Ages. In any event, the 14th-century pandemic clearly began in 1348 in the ports of Italy, apparently brought in by merchant ships from Black Sea ports. It gradually spread through Italy and in the next two years swept across Spain, France, England, central Europe and Scandinavia. It advanced slowly but pitilessly,

striking with deadliest effect in the crowded, unsanitary towns. Each year the epidemic rose to a peak in the late summer, when the fleas were most abundant, and subsided during the winter, only to break out anew in the spring. The pandemic of 1348–1350 was followed by a long series of recurrent outbreaks all over Europe, coming at intervals of 10 years or less. In London there were at least 20 attacks of plague in the 15th century, and in Venice the Black Death struck 23 times between 1348 and 1576. . . . The theories advanced to explain its [decline] are as unconvincing as those given for its rise. It was long supposed, for instance, that an invasion of Europe early in the 18th century by brown rats, which killed off the smaller black rats, was responsible for the decline of the disease. This can hardly be the reason; the plague had begun to subside decades before, and the brown rat did not by any means exterminate the black rat. More probably the answer must be sought in something that happened to the flea, the bacillus or the living conditions of the human host.

Citation

Langer, William L. "The Black Death." *Scientific American* 210, no. 2 (1964): 114–21.

Source 9 - The Cambridge World History of Human Disease, 1993

Title

The Cambridge World History of Human Disease

Source type

Secondary source – historical book

Date and location

1993, United Kingdom

Author

Kenneth F. Kiple (1939–2016)

Description

Kiple was a historian who often wrote about global processes and transformations. In this excerpt, he describes the state of knowledge about the Black Death in 1993.

Key vocabulary

ravaged	epizootics
speculative	enzootic
bacillus	

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

The “Black Death” is the name given by modern historians to the great pandemic of plague that ravaged parts of Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century . . . [it] recurred in waves, sometimes of great severity, through the eighteenth century. . . . almost all historians agree, on the basis of contemporary descriptions of its symptoms, that the Black Death should be identified as a massive epidemic of plague, a disease of rodents, caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, that can in the case of massive epizootics be transmitted to human beings by fleas. . . . The earliest indisputable evidence locates it in 1346 in the cities of the Kipchak Khanate of the Golden Horde, north and west of the Caspian Sea. Until recently, most historians have claimed, based on Arabic sources, that the epidemic originated somewhere to the east of the Caspian, in eastern Mongolia or Yunnan or Tibet, where plague is enzootic in various populations of wild rodents. From there it was supposed to have spread along the Mongol trade routes east to China, south to India, and west to the Kipchak Khanate, the Crimea, and Mediterranean. Recently, however, John Norris (1977) has contested this account, pointing out that the sources describing Chinese epidemics of the 1330s and 1340s and the inscriptions on the graves at Issyk Kul (1388–9), south of the Aral Sea, are too vague to allow us to identify the disease(s) in question as plague, and that there are no reliable records of Indian epidemics in the mid-fourteenth century. Although Norris’s own theory that the Black Death originated to the south of the Caspian in Kurdistan or Iraq is highly speculative (Dols

1978; Norris 1978), he is certainly correct that much more work needs to be done with Chinese and Mongol sources before we can say anything definite about the course of the Black Death before 1346 and its eastern geography and chronology after that date. The epidemic's westward trajectory, however, is well established. It reached the Crimea in the winter of 1346–7 and Constantinople shortly afterward. From there it followed two great, roughly circular paths. The first swirled counterclockwise south and east through the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Black Death reached lower Egypt in the autumn of 1347 and moved slowly up the Nile over the next 2 years. By early 1348, it had also hit Cyprus and Rhodes, and during the late spring and summer it moved through the cities of the Mediterranean littoral and Palestine—Gaza, Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo—and then east to Mecca, Armenia, and Baghdad, where it appeared in 1349. The second circle described by the plague was greater in length and duration and moved clockwise, west and north and finally east again, through the western Mediterranean and Europe. According to Italian chroniclers, Genoese ships brought the disease to Sicily from the Black Sea in the autumn of 1347, at about the same time it appeared in Alexandria. From there it spread to Tunisia, the Italian mainland, and Provence. By the summer of 1348 it had moved westward into the Iberian Peninsula and as far north as Paris and the ports of southern England. During 1349 it ravaged the rest of the British Isles and northern France, parts of the Low Countries and Norway, and southern and western Germany. In 1350 it was in northern and eastern Germany, Sweden, and the Baltics, and in 1351, in the eastern Baltics and northern Poland. During the following 2 years, it attacked Russia, reaching as far east as Moscow in the summer of 1353.

Citation

Kiple, Kenneth F. *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Source 10 - Black Death and Mongols Thematic Map, 2021

Title

Black Death and Mongols Thematic Map

Source type

Secondary source – map

Date and location

2021, United States

Author

OER Project

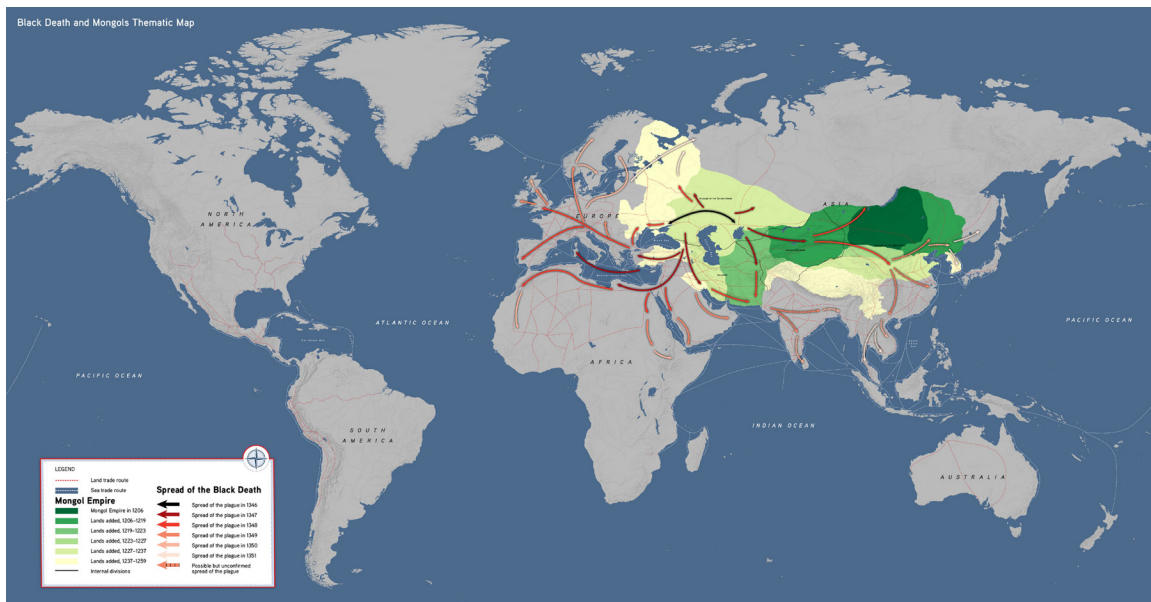
Description

This map shows the spread of the Black Death between 1345 and 1351. It also depicts the expansion of the Mongol Empire and trade routes.

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt



Citation

"Black Death and Mongols Thematic Map." By OER Project, 2021, CC BY-NC 4.0. <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1200-layer-3>

Source 11 - Rewriting the Black Death, 2021

Title

Rewriting the Black Death

Source type

Secondary source – podcast episode

Date and location

2021, United States

Author

Monica Green

Description

Monica Green is a historian of health, disease, and gender. She authored a noted article titled “Four Black Deaths” in *The American Historical Review* where she puts forth a path-breaking argument about the spread of the Black Death. She uses traditional historical sources and genomic sequencing to arrive at her innovative conclusion. Below is an excerpt from the transcript of an episode of the Ottoman History Podcast where she describes how she arrived at her interpretation. Her *American Historical Review* article provides a full account of her argument.

Key vocabulary

chronology

marmots

siege

millet

unbeknownst

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

Us passing it from one human to another is a very, very unlikely scenario for *long distance* spread of the disease. But clearly the genetics was saying, well, yes, it did spread a long distance. But what the genetics didn't really say was, again, the chronology. And so I was trying to look at the chronology. That siege at Lambasar that I mentioned happened in 1257. And I said, wait a minute, 1257 is *really early*, in terms of our narratives for the Black Death in western Eurasia, but it's *after* the sieges that Bob Hymes has documented for China. So it's got this middle position. . . . And what I found was this amazing new document that was discovered in 2007. It was published in its original Persian . . . this is a writer, his name is al-Shirazi . . . He's working at the Ilkhanate court with the Mongols, and these are apparently his notes on the western campaign of Hulegu, the grandson of Genghis Khan. And he describes the siege of Baghdad, which happened just a year after the siege of Lambasar and he says, in no uncertain terms, there was a massive outbreak of an epidemic at Baghdad. . . . unbeknownst to him, al-Shirazi also gave me a hint about what the mechanism of transmission was. Because what he said was, . . . in the Tian Shan mountains were there all of these marmots, the Tian Shan mountains in which there must have been some kind of spillover event that somehow the marmot reservoir there had been disrupted, and then plague is moving

out of the marmots into other species and into other contexts. . . . the hint that al-Shirazi gave me is that right next to the Tian Shan Mountains there's incredibly fertile land from which a very precious kind of millet is grown. The Mongols were importing that millet on their campaigns with them all the way into Central Asia. And what do they do with this millet? They make a kind of a superfood, . . . if you make kind of an oatmeal like mixture out of it and have a cup of that in the morning, that will give you all the energy you need for a whole day's work. And that's talking about soldiers! . . . also it can be used to brew beer . . . That was the key, and that was my proposition is that that's the mechanism by which the plague is actually moving. . . . the genetic evidence says that there were four baby black deaths. There are four new lineages of *Yersinia pestis* that get established from this spillover event. So plague is being knocked out of its marmot reservoir and then moving into new places, probably moving into new rodent hosts. And then getting transmitted a minimum of 1000 kilometers away and in some cases, very far distances. And then that's the story of the Black Death that we usually tell as the western story that and that's the gist of what I'm saying is the Black Death phenomenon . . . started a century, almost a century and a half earlier than we previously believed it spread farther than we previously believed. And that we have probably had a lot of evidence already under our noses that we didn't know how to read. Because nobody prior to the 19th century knew that *Yersinia pestis* existed. . . . So if this is the story, we're telling of the Black Death, that it starts in the 1340s, but the genetics is telling us a story that well, it started before the 1340s, how do we get those stories to sync? And what I realized is the way you get them to sync is expand your geography, expand your chronology, and then start to work on different levels. . . . The Black Death comes in but then it didn't just magically disappear. It didn't disappear. It lasted for another 400 years in Europe and lasted for another, well, I'm suggesting 600 years in the Middle East.

Citation

Green, Monica. "Rewriting the Black Death." By Chris Gratien. *Ottoman History Podcast Episode 512*, August 26, 2021. <https://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2021/08/green.html>.

Source 12 - Mystery of Black Death's origins solved, 2022

Title

Mystery of Black Death's origins solved, say researchers

Source type

Secondary source – news article

Date and location

2022, United Kingdom

Author

Ian Sample

Description

Science writer Ian Sample summarizes the latest research findings about the bubonic plague's origins in a news article published in The Guardian. The research, carried out by an international team of scholars, points to a central Asian origin for the plague.

Key vocabulary

anthropology	extracted
strains	bacterium
surge	genome
inscriptions	

Guiding question

How has our understanding of the Black Death changed over time?

Excerpt

Researchers believe they have solved the nearly 700-year-old mystery of the origins of the Black Death, . . .

“We have basically located the origin in time and space, which is really remarkable,” said Prof Johannes Krause at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology . . . “We found not only the ancestor of the Black Death, but the ancestor of the majority of the plague strains that are circulating in the world today.”

The international team came together to work on the puzzle when Dr Philip Slavin, a historian at the University of Stirling, discovered evidence for a sudden surge in deaths in the late 1330s at two cemeteries near Lake Issyk-Kul in the north of modern-day Kyrgyzstan.

Among 467 tombstones dated between 1248 and 1345, Slavin traced a huge increase in deaths, with 118 stones dated 1338 or 1339. Inscriptions on some of the tombstones mentioned the cause of death as “mawtānā”, the Syriac language term for “pestilence”.

. . .

The investigation then passed over to specialists on ancient DNA . . . They extracted genetic material from the teeth of seven individuals who were buried at the cemeteries. Three of them contained DNA from *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes bubonic plague.

Full analysis of the bacterium's genome found that it was a direct ancestor of the strain that caused the Black Death in Europe eight years later and, as a result, was probably the cause of death for more than half the population on the continent in the next decade or so.

Citation

Sample, Ian. "Mystery of Black Death's origins solved, say researchers." *The Guardian*, June 15, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/jun/15/mystery-black-death-origins-solved-plague-pandemic>

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