The Black Death

Origins of the 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.

Arrival in the West

It reached Cyprus late in summer 1347. In Oct. 1347, a Genoese fleet landed at Messina, Sicily. By winter it was in Italy.

January 1348, the plague was in Marseilles. It reached Paris in the spring 1348 and England in September 1348.

Moving along the Rhine trade routes, the plague reached Germany in 1348, and the Low Countries the same year. 1348 was the worst of the plague years.

It took longer to reach the periphery of Europe. Norway was hit in May 1349. The eastern European countries were not reached until 1350, and Russia not until 1351.

Because the disease tended to follow trade routes, and to concentrate in cities, it followed a circuitous route: the Near East, the western Mediterranean, then into northern Europe and finally back into Russia. The progress of the plague very neatly describes the geography of medieval trade.

About the Disease
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.

The flea then regurgitates the blood from the rat into the human, infecting the human. The rat dies. The human dies. The flea’s stomach gets blocked and it eventually dies of starvation. It’s a grim disease for everyone.

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 swellings continue to expand until they eventually burst, with death following soon after. The whole process, from first symptoms of fever and aches, to final expiration, lasts only three or four days. The swiftness of the disease, the terrible pain, the grotesque appearance of the victims, all served to make the plague especially terrifying.

**Forms of the Disease**

Bubonic plague is usually fatal, though not inevitably so. Today, we have drugs that can cure it, if administered in time. But if the victim is already at risk, through malnutrition or other illness, it is more deadly. There were plenty of people in the 1340s who were at risk.

Even so, historians have been hard pressed to explain the extraordinary mortality of the 1348 outbreak. Our best guess is that there was more than one variety of plague at work in Europe.

There are two other varieties of plague: septicaemic plague, which attacks the blood, and pneumonic plague, which attacks the lungs. The latter is especially dangerous as it can be transmitted through the air. Both these two are nearly 100% fatal.

It seems likely that some form of pneumonic plague was at work alongside the bubonic plague in those awful years. But the many accounts we have describe mainly the bubonic form. The next two pages are two contemporary accounts of the plague.
Another Description

From Agnolo di Tura, of Siena:

"The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing. . . . It seemed that almost everyone became stupefied seeing the pain. It is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. The victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath the armpits and in the groin, and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. None could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. In many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. I, Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world."

Official Reactions

Contrary to what you might think, the reaction from public officials, and from many churchmen, was that this calamity was not the vengeance of God upon a sinful world but was a disease. Authorities took what steps they could to deal with it, but of course their effectiveness was limited.

Cities were hardest hit and tried to take measures to control an epidemic no one understood. In Milan, to take one of the most successful examples, city officials immediately walled up houses found to have the plague, isolating the healthy in them along with the sick.

Venice took sophisticated and stringent quarantine and health measures, including isolating all incoming ships on a separate island. But people died anyway, though fewer in Milan and Venice than in cities that took no such measures.

Medical Measures
When the government acts to prevent or control a calamity, but the calamity persists, people turn to other cures. Many believed that the disease was transmitted upon the air, probably because the smell from the dead and dying was so awful. So, the living turned to scents to ward off the deadly vapors.

People burned all manner of incense: juniper, laurel, pine, beech, lemon leaves, rosemary, camphor, sulphur and others. Handkerchiefs were dipped in aromatic oils, to cover the face when going out.

The cure of sound was another remedy. Towns rang church bells to drive the plague away, for the ringing of town bells was done in crises of all kinds. Other towns fired cannons, which were new and which made comfortingly loud din.

And there was to end of talismans, charms and spells that could be purchased from the local wise woman or apothecary. People were desperate for a cure and would try anything, no matter how outlandish or strange.

**Learned Opinion**

The cause of the disease was a matter of concern to many. Popular opinion did view the plague as a scourge from God, for the times were indeed out of joint. This was mere vulgar opinion, however, and the learned knew better than to believe it. But what, then, was the source of the plague?

The pope sent to Paris to obtain the opinions of the medical faculty there in 1348. They studied the problem for a time and returned a report. The good professors opined that the disaster was caused by a particularly unfortunate conjunction of Saturn, Jupiter and Mars in the sign of Aquarius that had occurred in 1345. This conjunction cause hot, moist conditions, which cause the earth to exhale poisonous vapors.

The report went on to recommend steps to keep safe from the disease. This, in part, was their prescription:

No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no pig, no old beef, altogether no fat meat. . . . It is injurious to sleep during the daytime. . . . Fish should not be eaten, too much exercise may be injurious . . . and nothing should be cooked in rainwater. Olive oil with food is deadly. . . . Bathing is dangerous. . . .

In time, other writings appeared from the pens of educated men on the best ways to avoid the plague. From Italy came this advice:
In the first instance, no man should think of death. . . . Nothing should distress him, but all his thoughts should be directed to pleasing, agreeable and delicious things. . . . Beautiful landscapes, fine gardens should be visited, particularly when aromatic plants are flowering. . . . Listening to beautiful, melodious songs is wholesome. . . . The contemplating of gold and silver and other precious stones is comforting to the heart.

Avoidance

In truth, about the only action that was effective was quarantine--simply staying far enough away that no fleas could reach you. Avoiding the sick was a natural enough instinct.

In Germany, there was a bishop who during mass offered the host at the end of a pole or on a long-handled spoon. The wealthy would flee to the countryside. Pope Clement VI, living at Avignon, sat between two large fires to breath pure air. The plague bacillus actually is destroyed by heat, so this was one of the few truly effective measures taken.

The Flagellants

If the plague was a manifestation of divine anger, then Christians should do all they could to assuage that anger. From this simple impulse came the flagellants: bands of people who wandered through towns and countryside doing penance in public. They inflicted all sort of punishments upon themselves, trying to atone for the evil of the world, sacrificing themselves for the world's sins in imitation of Jesus.

Society generally wondered at them and did not approve. The flagellants showed a tendency to kill Jews they encountered, and even killed clergymen who spoke against them. In October 1349 the pope condemned them and ordered all authorities to suppress them. But flagellants reappeared in times of plague well into the fifteenth century.

Descriptions of the Flagellants

Here are a couple of descriptions of the flagellants from contemporary chroniclers. The first is from Jean de Venette.
While the plague was still active and spreading from town to town, men in Germany, Flanders, Hainault and Lorraine uprose and began a new sect on their own authority. Stripped to the waist, they gathered in large groups and bands and marched in procession through the crossroads and squares of cities and good towns. They formed circles and beat upon their backs with weighted scourges, rejoicing as they did so in loud voices and singing hymns suitable to their rite and newly composed for it. Thus, for 33 days they marched through many towns doing penance and affording a great spectacle to the wondering people. They flogged their shoulders and arms, scourged with iron points so zealously as to draw blood.”

This second account is from the medieval historian Jean Froissart, from his history of the Hundred Years' War.

...the penitents went about, coming first out of Germany. They were men who did public penance and scourged themselves with whips of hard knotted leather with little iron spikes. Some made themselves bleed very badly between the shoulder blades and some foolish women had cloths ready to catch the blood and smear it on their eyes, saying it was miraculous blood. While they were doing penance, they sang very mournful songs about nativity and the passion of Our Lord. The object of this penance was to put a stop to the mortality, for in that time . . . at least a third of all the people in the world died.

**Population Loss**

Froissart's estimate of the population loss was about right, which is ironic because Froissart wildly exaggerated numbers in almost all his accounts. But the best of many revised estimates still put the overall population loss in Europe at about one-third.

This bears re-stating. The plague came to Europe in the fall of 1347. By 1350 it had largely passed out of western Europe. 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.

Certain professions suffered higher mortality, especially those whose duties brought them into contact with the sick—doctors and clergy. In Montpellier, only seven of 140 Dominican friars survived. In Perpignan, only one of nine physicians survived, and two of eighteen barber-surgeons.

The death rate at Avignon was fifty percent and was even higher among the clergy. One-third of the cardinals died. Clement VI had to consecrate the Rhone River so corpses could be sunk in it, for there was neither time nor room to bury them.

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.

Hardest hit were special groups, such as the friars, who took a couple of generations to recover. In many areas, pre-plague population levels were not reached until the 1500s; in a few, not until the 1600s.

This is one reason why the Black Death marks a dividing line between the central Middle Ages, with medieval culture in full bloom and at its greatest strength, and the later Middle Ages. The later period was one of chronically reduced population.

**Cultural Effects**

As the chroniclers said, the plague touched everyone, rich and poor alike. The noted Florentine historian, Villani, wrote this: "And many lands and cities were made desolate. And the plague lasted until ________" Villani left a blank at the end of the sentence, planning to fill in a date after the plague had abated. He never did. Villani died in 1348 from the plague.

The whole community of scholars suffered as universities and schools, usually located in regions hardest hit, were closed or even abandoned. Sixteen of the forty professors at Cambridge died.
Likewise in the institutions of the Church. The priests died and no one could hear confession. Bishops died, and so did their successors and even their successors.

The loss of life in such great numbers and to so gruesome a disease, brought despair everywhere. Why would God do this? and why could not His servants in the Church avert or mitigate His wrath?

"During this great epidemic of death [in Tuscany] more than eighty died of every hundred, and the air was so infested that death overtook men everywhere, wherever they might flee. And when they saw everybody dying they no longer heeded death and believed that the end of the world was at hand."
The tone in this excerpt finds echoes throughout Europe. There were those indeed who believed this calamity marked the end of the world. Even after the crisis had passed, and the world remained, there were those who wondered why God should have so scourged the world.