

# Global Impact: The Spread of Epidemic Disease

INTERACTIVE

## The Bubonic Plague

The bubonic plague, or Black Death, was a killer disease that swept repeatedly through many areas of the world. It wiped out two-thirds of the population in some areas of China, destroyed populations of Muslim towns in Southwest Asia, and then decimated one-third of the European population.

### Route of the Plague



- 1 The horse-riding Mongols likely carried infected fleas and rats in their food supplies as they swooped into China.
- 2 The disease came with merchants along the trade routes of Asia to southern Asia, southwest Asia, and Africa.
- 3 In 1345–46, a Mongol army besieged Kaffa. A year later, Italian merchants returned to Italy, unknowingly bringing the plague with them.

### Disease Spreads














Black rats carried fleas that were infested with a bacillus called *Yersinia pestis*. Because people did not bathe, almost all had fleas and lice. In addition, medieval people threw their garbage and sewage into the streets. These unsanitary streets became breeding grounds for more rats. The fleas carried by rats leapt from person to person, thus spreading the bubonic plague with incredible speed.

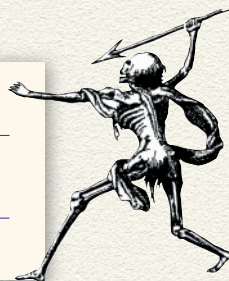


### Symptoms of the Bubonic Plague

- Painful swellings called buboes (BOO-bohz) in the lymph nodes, particularly those in the armpits and groin
- Sometimes purplish or blackish spots on the skin
- Extremely high fever, chills, delirium, and in most cases, death

### Death Tolls, 1300s

Western Europe	      20–25 million
China, India, other Asians	      25 million
	 = 4 million




### Patterns of Interaction

*The Spread of Epidemic Disease: Bubonic Plague and Smallpox*

The spread of disease has been a very tragic result of cultures interacting with one another across place and time. Such diseases as smallpox and influenza have killed millions of people, sometimes, as with the Aztecs, virtually destroying civilizations.

### Connect to Today

1. **Hypothesizing** Had people known the cause of the bubonic plague, what might they have done to slow its spread?  
 See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R15.
2. **Comparing** What diseases of today might be compared to the bubonic plague? Why?



The bubonic plague took about four years to reach almost every corner of Europe. Some communities escaped unharmed, but in others, approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of those who caught the disease died. Before the bubonic plague ran its course, it killed almost 25 million Europeans and many more millions in Asia and North Africa.

The plague returned every few years, though it never struck as severely as in the first outbreak. However, the periodic attacks further reduced the population.

**Effects of the Plague** The economic and social effects of the plague were enormous. The old manorial system began to crumble. Some of the changes that occurred included these:

- Town populations fell.
- Trade declined. Prices rose.
- The serfs left the manor in search of better wages.
- Nobles fiercely resisted peasant demands for higher wages, causing peasant revolts in England, France, Italy, and Belgium.
- Jews were blamed for bringing on the plague. All over Europe, Jews were driven from their homes or, worse, massacred.
- The Church suffered a loss of prestige when its prayers failed to stop the onslaught of the bubonic plague and priests abandoned their duties. **B**

The bubonic plague and its aftermath disrupted medieval society, hastening changes that were already in the making. The society of the Middle Ages was collapsing. The century of war between England and France was that society's final death struggle.

## The Hundred Years' War

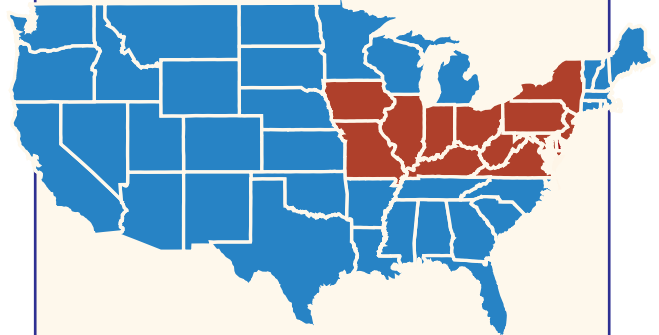
Not only did the people in Europe during the 1300s have to deal with epidemic disease, but they also had to deal with war. England and France battled with each other on French soil for just over a century. The century of war between England and France marked the end of medieval Europe's society.

When the last Capetian king died without a successor, England's Edward III, as grandson of Philip IV, claimed the right to the French throne. The war that Edward III launched for that throne continued on and off from 1337 to 1453. It became known as the **Hundred Years' War**. Victory passed back and forth between the two countries. Finally, between 1421 and 1453, the French rallied and drove the English out of France entirely, except for the port city of Calais.

The Hundred Years' War brought a change in the style of warfare in Europe. At this time some combatants were still operating under medieval ideals of chivalry. They looked with contempt on the common foot soldiers and archers who fought alongside them. This contempt would change as the longbow changed warfare.

### If the Plague Struck America Today

The bubonic plague reportedly wiped out about one-third of Europe's population in the 1300s. In the United States today, a one-third death toll would equal over 96 million people, or the number living in the states represented by the color ■.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census

#### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. **Clarifying** How many states on the chart would have lost their entire population to the plague?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** How might the chart help explain why many Europeans thought the world was ending?

#### MAIN IDEA

##### Recognizing Effects

**B** Which of the effects of the plague do you think most changed life in the medieval period?