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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Tolls</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>20–25 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China, India, other</td>
<td>25 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asians</td>
<td>= 4 million</td>
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Patterns of Interaction

The spread of epidemic 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.

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.