

THE BLACK DEATH

“Wretched, terrible, destructive year, the remnants of the people alone remain.” That description of 1349 was found on a hand-carved sign only months after the bubonic plague reached England. Between 1347 and 1353, the plague, or the Black Death, killed one third of the population of Europe—more than 25 million people.

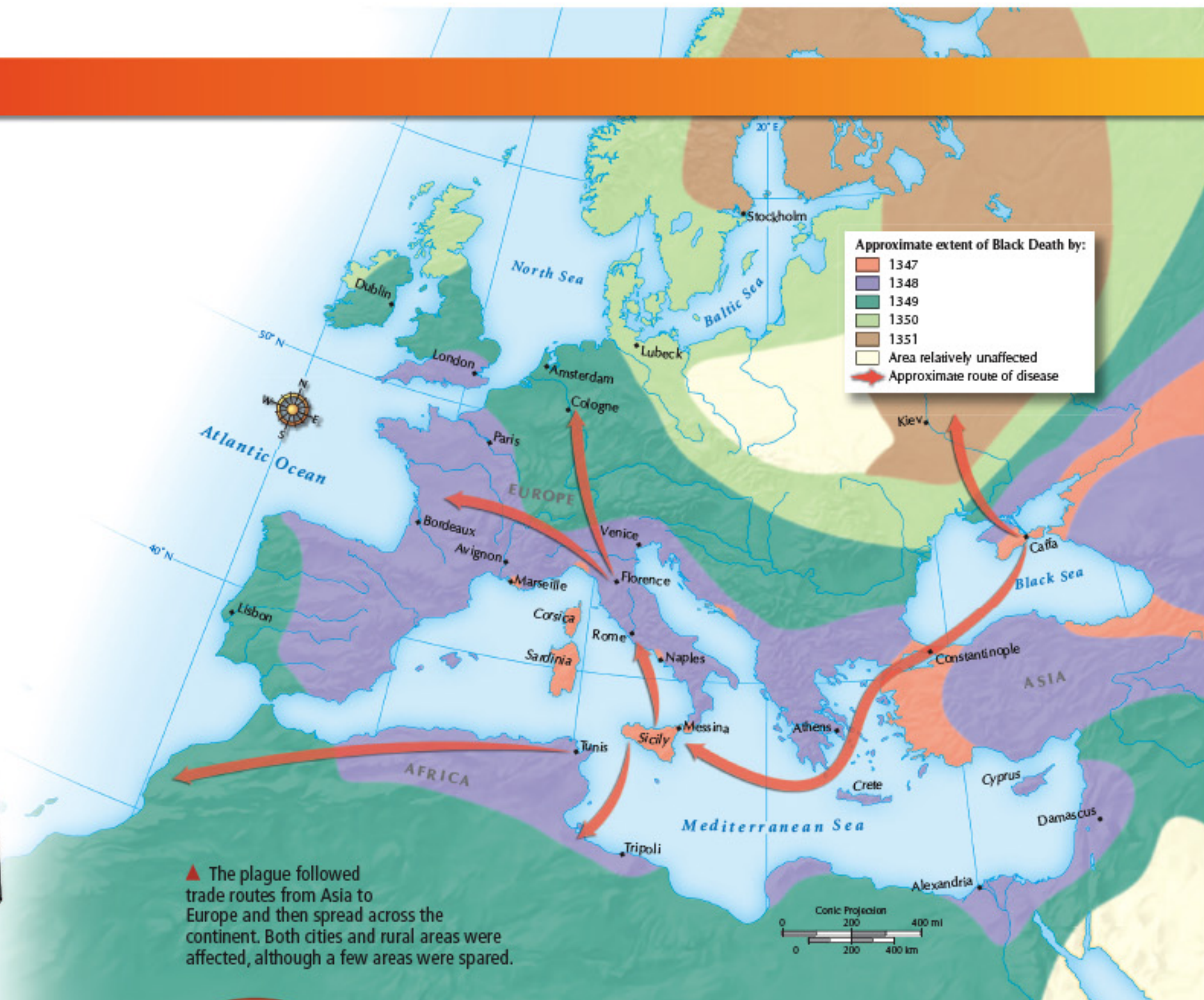
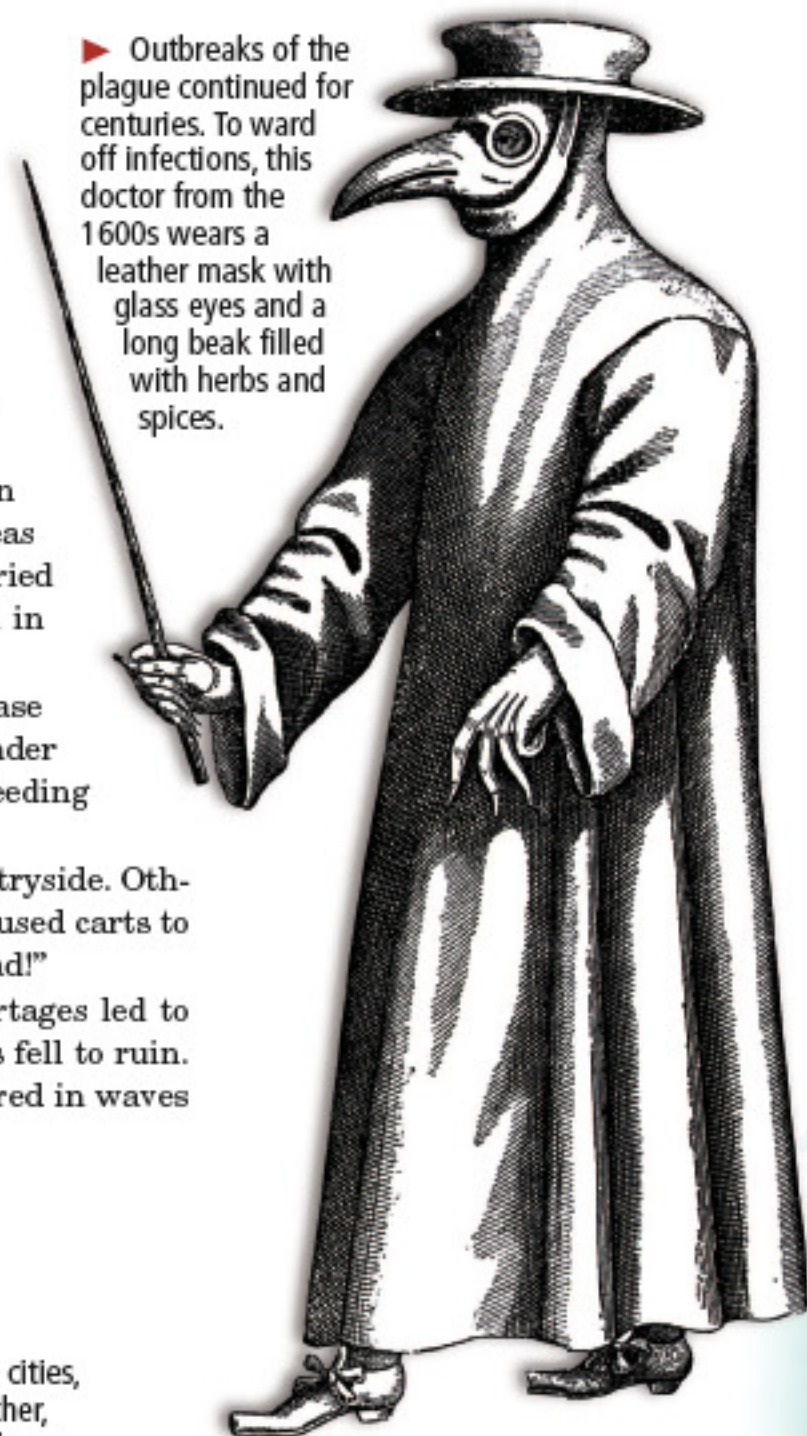
The plague was caused by bacteria carried by fleas that lived on rats. The epidemic probably originated in China, where infected fleas got into the packs of merchants traveling west. Merchant ships carried the plague from busy Black Sea ports to Sicily. Spreading outward in waves of terror, the Black Death soon ravaged most of Europe.

Flea-covered rats thrived in filthy medieval cities, and the disease spread quickly. Within hours, victims developed egg-sized lumps under their arms. Fever, vomiting, and black spots caused by internal bleeding followed. Once victims started spitting blood, death was certain.

As the disease raced through towns, many people fled to the countryside. Others hid in their homes. The death toll was so high that gravediggers used carts to collect corpses as they walked the streets calling “Bring out your dead!”

So many farm workers died that crops rotted in the fields. Shortages led to demands for higher wages and peasant revolts. Buildings and roads fell to ruin. And survivors lived in fear of the return of the plague, which recurred in waves through the 1600s.

▶ Outbreaks of the plague continued for centuries. To ward off infections, this doctor from the 1600s wears a leather mask with glass eyes and a long beak filled with herbs and spices.



▲ The plague followed trade routes from Asia to Europe and then spread across the continent. Both cities and rural areas were affected, although a few areas were spared.



◀ In crowded medieval cities, houses were close together, and residents threw garbage and human waste into the streets. Rats and fleas were commonplace in the homes of both the rich and the poor.

▼ In the Middle Ages, rats were great travelers. They thrived on ships and moved from port to port—bringing their fleas with them. Fleas that had bitten infected rats then bit people, spreading disease.



▲ Medieval medicine could do little against the plague. This doctor attempts to drain a sore on a woman's neck.

▼ As the Black Death took its toll, towns ran out of coffins like the ones shown here. Instead, piles of bodies were buried in huge pits.



Thinking Critically

- Map Skills** (a) Where did the plague first strike in Europe? (b) How long did it take to reach England?
- Draw Inferences** Why did the Black Death inspire such fear?
- Recognize Cause and Effect** How did the Black Death lead to social disorder?

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