

Primary Source: said by Marchione di Coppo Stefani

"Neither physicians nor medicines were effective. Whether because these illnesses were previously unknown or because physicians had not previously studied them, there seemed to be no cure. There was such a fear that no one seemed to know what to do. When it took hold in a house it often happened that no one remained who had not died. And it was not just that men and women died, but even sentient animals died. Dogs, cats, chickens, oxen, donkeys sheep showed the same symptoms and died of the same disease. And almost none, or very few, who showed these symptoms, were cured. The symptoms were the following: a bubo in the groin, where the thigh meets the trunk; or a small swelling under the armpit; sudden fever; spitting blood and saliva (and no one who spit blood survived it). It was such a frightful thing that when it got into a house", as was said, no one remained. Frightened people abandoned the house and fled to another."

G

Cures for the Black Death

The following table contains ways that people tried to stop the Black Death.

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| Drink a glass of your own urine twice a day | Wear a magpie's beak around your neck. | Hold sweet herbs to your mouth to drive away the bad air. | Sit in a sewer. | Swallow the powder of crushed emeralds. |
| Open your veins and let a pint of blood pour out. | Kills all the cats and dogs in the town. | Shave a chicken's bottom and strap it to your plague sores. | March around town whipping yourself and ask for God's forgiveness. | Eat bread, fruit, and vegetables, but no meat of fish. |
| Clean up the streets and burn the clothes of victims. | Slice the sores open and squeeze out the plague and then seal it with feces. | Wash yourself with vinegar and rose water. | Cut a hole in your skull so the evil spirits leave you. | Soften sores with figs, cooked onions, yeast and butter and then cut them open. |
| Dry out a toad and place it on a sore. When it enlarges, replace it with a new dried toad. | Sit in between fires. | Get rid of all the bad smells. | Make the person who is infected vomit to expel the Plague. | Use leeches to suck the blood from the victim. |

Adapted from www.activehistory.co.uk/



Plague victims. The illustrator of an early fifteenth-century German chronicle imagined the plague of Egypt—sent by God, according to the Book of Exodus in the Bible, to make Pharaoh “let my people go”—with the same symptoms as the Black Death. In the background, Moses brings plague down on Egypt by prayer. By implication, prayer and obedience to the will of God could also be remedies for plague.

D

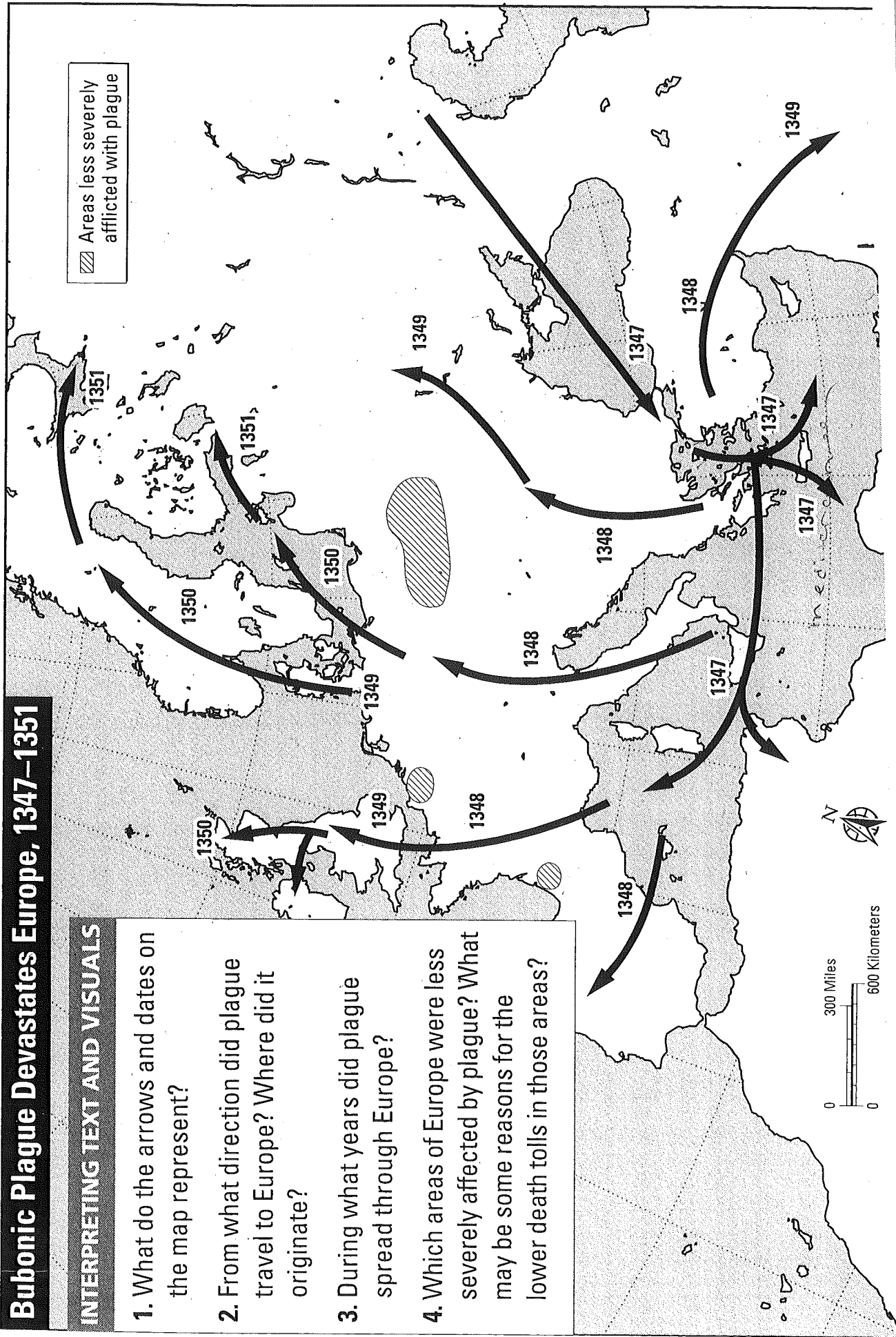
The plague I have been describing was of so contagious a nature that very often it visibly did more than simply pass from one person to another. In other words, whenever an animal other than a human being touched anything belonging to a person who had been stricken or exterminated by the disease, it not only caught the sickness, but died from it almost at once. To all of this, as I have just said, my own eyes bore witness on more than one occasion. One day, for instance, the rags of a pauper¹ who had died from the disease were thrown into the street, where they attracted the attention of two pigs. In their wonted fashion,² the pigs first of all gave the rags a thorough mauling with their snouts, after which they took them between their teeth and shook them against their cheeks. And within a short time they began to writhe as though they had been poisoned, then they both dropped dead to the ground, spread-eagled upon the rags that had brought about their undoing.

Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 6–7.

Bubonic Plague Devastates Europe, 1347-1351

INTERPRETING TEXT AND VISUALS

1. What do the arrows and dates on the map represent?
2. From what direction did plague travel to Europe? Where did it originate?
3. During what years did plague spread through Europe?
4. Which areas of Europe were less severely affected by plague? What may be some reasons for the lower death tolls in those areas?



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—over 25 million people.

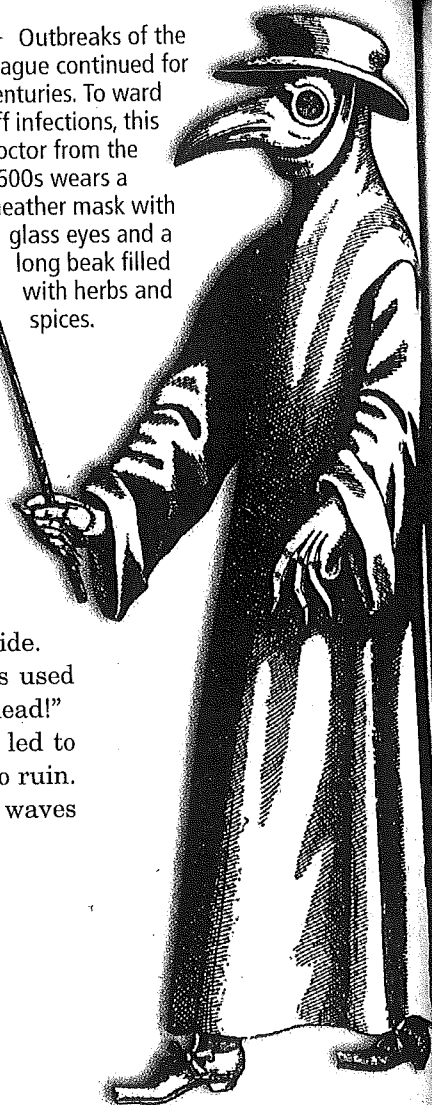
The plague was caused by bacteria carried by fleas that lived on rats. The epidemic probably originated in China, where infected fleas got into the packs of merchants traveling west. Merchant ships carried the plague from busy Black Sea ports to Sicily. Spreading outward in waves of terror, The Black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



◀ 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.

