

One in Three: The Horror of the Black Death

First, there were rumors whispered in European cities about an unknown disease in Asia. Then, in 1347, ships landed in Italy with most of the sailors on board dead or dying. From then on, Europe was never the same again.

These sailors were sick with the Black Death, a disease that would go on to kill roughly one in three of all Europeans between 1347 and 1351. Today, scientists know the disease was spread by rats. These animals carried infected fleas that would then go on to bite people. Those who already had the disease could also spread it to others by sneezing and coughing. However, this was not understood at the time, so people were powerless to stop the illness.

Conditions across Europe in 1347 were ideal for the spread of the disease. Trade between countries was common, and ships bearing goods for trade, like wool and timber, also carried infected rats from port to port. Cities and towns were crowded and dirty, which meant the disease could quickly spread between people. Rats and fleas were everywhere, and the Black Death soon reached every corner of the continent.

The Black Death got its name from the black, painful lumps that appeared on an infected person's skin. After these had formed, the infected would become weak and develop a fever before finally dying.

In the face of this horror, people were willing to try anything to fight the disease. It was believed that the illness spread through bad smells, so doctors began to wear masks stuffed with nice-smelling herbs. However, this did not protect them. With no effective treatments, families sometimes abandoned their sick loved ones to save themselves. Those who were already infected often tried to cure the sickness by bathing in vinegar or by performing controlled bleedings.

Every part of society was affected, from the richest to the poorest. So many people died that there was a worker shortage. This meant that poor workers were able to ask for higher wages and have more control over their own lives.

By the time the Black Death was finally over, European society had been changed forever. What started as rumors of a disease in Asia ended as one of the scariest and most impactful chapters in Western history.