

Primary Sources: The Black Death, 1348

By Henry Knighton, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.30.17

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Level **600L**



A miniature from a 14th century Belgium manuscript showing people burying the dead from the Black Death in Tournai, Belgium.

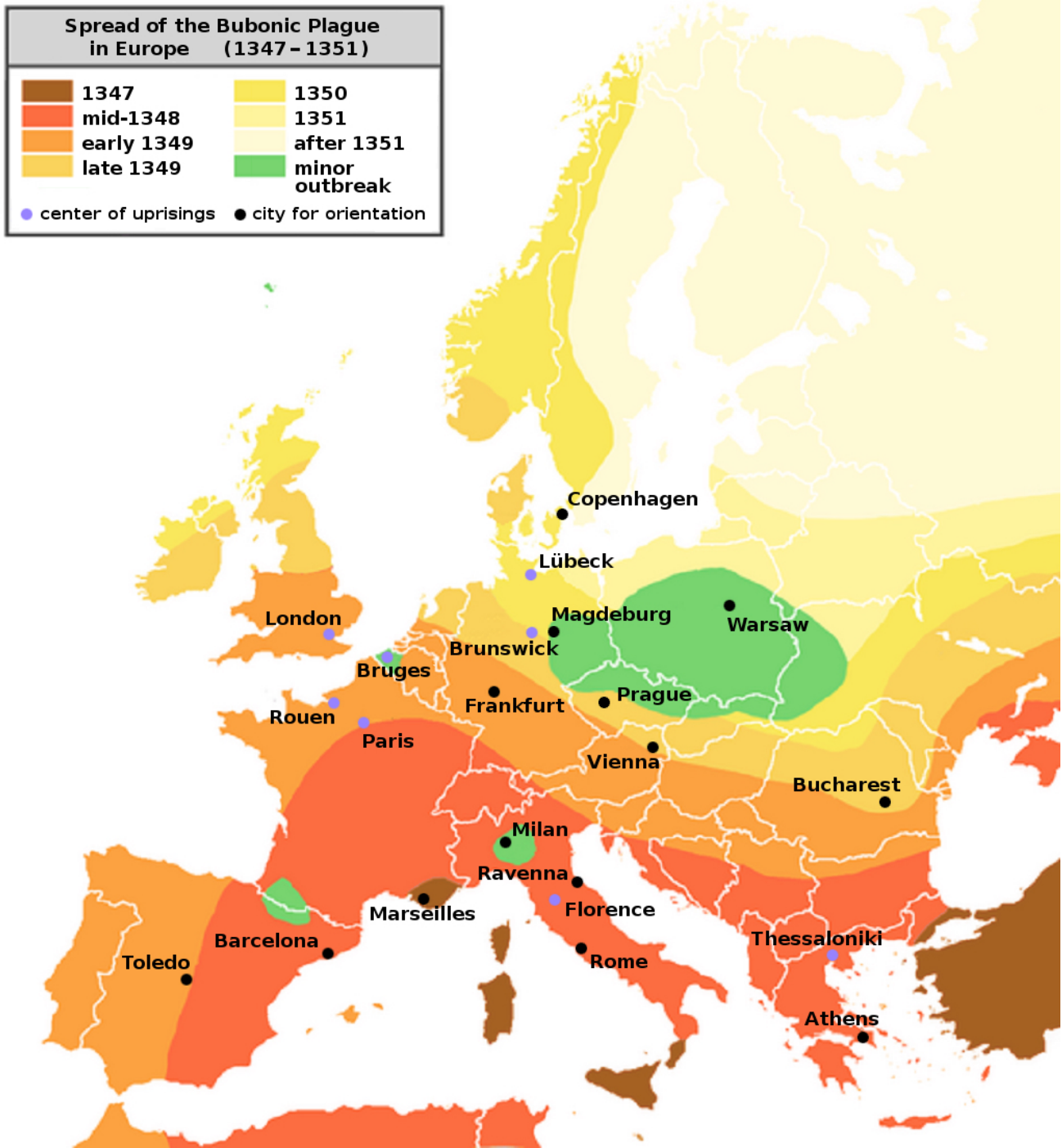
A plague is a disease that spreads from person to person. It can happen in one or many countries. The Black Death was one of the worst plagues in history. Between 1346 and 1353, almost 200 million may have died. The Black Death is thought to have come from rats. It started in Asia and moved west along the Silk Road. It reached Eastern Europe by 1343. Cargo ships bringing riches from the east also brought rats. These rats had a germ in their blood. Fleas on the rats bit them and got the germ, too. Fleas then jumped onto humans and bit them. This germ started killing humans by attacking the lungs. A cough spread the germ to other humans. Touching the body of a sick person also spread the Black Death. It was called Black Death because black sores were seen on the skin.

In October 1347, 12 trading ships docked in Sicily, Italy. Most of the sailors had died from the Black Death. Those that were still alive were very sick. The “death ships” were ordered out of the harbor. But it was too late. Thousands in Sicily died. The ships left, but brought the sickness to other ports in Italy and France. Over the next five years, the Black Death would kill almost half of the people living in Europe. Almost 25 million died.

Henry Knighton was a writer and priest at St. Mary's of Leicester in England. He wrote about the Black Death.

"It Killed Muslims First And Then Christians and Jews"

In 1348 and 1349, the Black Death killed millions of people around the world. It began first in India and moved west to Tarsus, Turkey. It killed Muslims first and then Christians and Jews. The king of Tarsus was Muslim and feared that his people were being punished because they were not Christian. So he and his leaders decided to go to the pope, in France. They wanted him to make them Christian. But after 20 days of traveling they heard that the plague had killed many Christians, too. So they turned back to return to Tarsus. But Christians, who were following the king and his people, attacked. Almost 2,000 Muslims were killed.



Then this most terrible plague came to the coast of England. It moved through Dorset to Devon to Somerset and up to Bristol. The people of Gloucester stopped people escaping from Bristol. They feared those people would spread the sickness. But the Black Death attacked Gloucester, Oxford and London too. Almost nine out every 10 men and women in England died. Churchyards were not large enough to bury the dead. So fields had to be used.

At that time, there were not enough priests in churches for services, prayers for dying, or funerals. Cases in the courts of the king came to a stop. People feared the spread of the plague.

"The Awful Plague Started Killing The Scots"

In the same year, a deadly sickness started killing sheep. More than 5,000 sheep died in one pasture. Their bodies were rotting. No animal or bird would touch them. Sheep and cattle roamed through the fields eating the corn. People were afraid to go near them. No one stopped them.

The Scots heard that the plague was killing their enemy, the English. They felt God was punishing England. So they planned to attack them. But the awful plague started killing the Scots. Almost 5,000 died. They retreated to Scotland. But then the English attacked and killed many of them.

"There Were Villages That Lost All Their People"

People stayed away from those that were sick. They were happy and healthy on one day. But the next day they would be sick and dying. All over their bodies were little black boils. Some were able to live through the plague. But there were villages that lost all their people.

In the following year, the sickness moved on to Wales. It then went on to Ireland. The English living there died in great numbers. But the Irish, living in the mountains and uplands, did not get sick until 1357. Then they started dying, too.

Quiz

1 Look at the picture and its caption at the top of the article.

What does the picture show?

- (A) people who had survived the plague escaping
- (B) people who had died from the plague being buried
- (C) people sending away ships carrying the plague
- (D) people going to church to pray about the plague

2 Look at the map included with the article.

What year did the plague reach London?

- (A) 1347
- (B) 1348
- (C) 1349
- (D) 1350

3 Which sentence BEST states a MAIN idea of the entire article?

- (A) There was no way to stop the plague from spreading to many places.
- (B) A sickness started killing sheep the same year the plague arrived.
- (C) The plague killed many Muslims when it began in India and Turkey.
- (D) The plague stopped cases in the courts of the king from going on.

4 Read the paragraph from the section "There Were Villages That Lost All Their People."

People stayed away from those that were sick. They were happy and healthy on one day. But the next day they would be sick and dying. All over their bodies were little black boils. Some were able to live through the plague. But there were villages that lost all their people.

What is the MAIN idea of this paragraph?

- (A) The plague made people stay far away from those who were sick.
- (B) The plague moved through many villages and countries.
- (C) People did not get the plague if they were happy and healthy.
- (D) People did not know who would get sick and who would survive.