

# BLACK DEATH

## The End of the World



*Rats were responsible for the spread of the plague. This painting, titled Dance of the Rats During Plague Time, was painted around 1800.*

**B**ring out your dead! Bring out your dead!" the driver cried as the horse-drawn carts rumbled through the streets of Europe in the 1300s. Bodies were dragged from almost every house and thrown onto the carts. Corpse was tossed on top of corpse until the bodies were like logs in a pile of firewood. Sometimes several bodies were carried out of the same house. The Black Death had struck! One person in every three would die of the plague before it ran its course.

<sup>2</sup> The Black Death was the worst calamity of all times, wiping out the entire populations of some villages. In the large city of Smolensk, Russia, only five people survived the plague. Nine out of every ten citizens of London fell victim to the Black Death. Virtually the entire populations of Iceland and Cyprus were wiped out.

<sup>3</sup> So many people were struck down by the plague that the supply of coffins was soon exhausted, and the dead were carried on wooden planks to huge mass-burial pits. Corpses were piled several high, and then a thin layer of dirt was shoveled over them. Often the burials took place with no member of the family or clergy present. As people fled before the spreading plague, spouse abandoned spouse, and parents forsook children.

4 The plague spread quickly from person to person. People went to bed well and were dead by morning. A doctor might arrive at a home to treat a victim only to catch the plague and die before the original sufferer.

5 The Black Death derived its name from the color of the victim's skin in death; a person who was infected always died within three days, skin covered by black patches. There were other symptoms too. Patients developed egg-sized swellings in the groin and armpits. Sometimes victims coughed and sweated violently.

6 The first people to know the horror of the Black Death were the Chinese, who were hit earlier in the 14th century. The disease quickly spread to the Tartars, a people originally from the area where the present-day borders of China and the Commonwealth of Independent States (formerly the Soviet Union) meet. The Tartars, under their great leader Kipchak Janiberg, had fought their way westward across Russia. They had conquered all the Russian lands as far into Europe as the Black Sea—and they carried the plague with them.

7 The Tartar advance had been halted by a trading colony of Italians located in a city on the Black Sea. As more and more of Kipchak's Tartars became victims of the Black Death, he began to realize that the Italian city would never fall to him. Kipchak's troops had brought huge *catapults*, devices like giant slingshots, with them. The Tartars used them to throw huge stones against the stone walls of forts. Kipchak had the catapults loaded with the bodies of Tartars who had died of the Black Death. The corpses were thrown over the walls and into the city, where



People believed that one way to escape the plague was by fleeing to the country. This woodcut from 1630 shows Londoners as they leave the city

for the surrounding countryside. Note the skeletons and dead body along the way.

they quickly spread the plague to the Italian colonists.

<sup>8</sup> Both Italians and Tartars abandoned the city. Some of the Italians boarded a galley and rowed to Italy as fast as they could. When the galley arrived at the Italian port of Messina, the inhabitants of the port found some of the rowers dead and the remainder dying of the plague. The Black Death had come to Italy.

<sup>9</sup> The plague quickly spread throughout Italy and passed on to France. From France, the plague was carried across the English Channel to Great Britain. The cycle of death was completed when the plague spread from Britain to all the rest of Europe, sparing no country. Human survival was threatened. No wonder people said,—and believed—"This is the end of the world."

<sup>10</sup> Many people believed that the plague was caused by the wrath of God. Societies of *flagellants* formed. The societies derived their name from the whips members used to beat themselves and one another. Dressed in sackcloth and ashes, the flagellants moved from town to town, beating themselves with leather whips tipped with metal points.

<sup>11</sup> The flagellation made as much sense as some of the other cures proposed for the plague. The crude science of the 14th century gave no idea of either the cause of the Black Death or its cure. Thinkers came

up with an idea that combined astrology, geology, and superstition. Jupiter and Mars had passed very close to Earth, and the proximity of the two planets was believed to have caused cracks in the earth's crust. The cracks, they believed, permitted poisonous fumes from the earth's center to escape and cause the plague.

<sup>12</sup> Since the scientists of the time had no idea of the plague's cause, their "cures" were nearly as horrible as the disease itself. People ate and drank concoctions of blood, goat urine, lizards, toads, and boils that had been dried and powdered. Plague victims were advised to rip open the bodies of puppies and pigeons and hold the torn flesh against their plague boils. While people were vainly trying these cures, the Black Death continued its deadly passage across Europe.

<sup>13</sup> The real cause of the plague had been partially discovered by an Arab physician 400 years before. The physician had noted that the plague broke out only after rats had come out of their holes to die in the open air. This observation was accurate but failed to take into account one final piece needed for the puzzle's solution—fleas. The plague germs lived and multiplied in the bodies of fleas. Every rat had hundreds of fleas that lived on rats' blood and infected them with the Black Death. When the rats died of the plague, the fleas

jumped onto the nearest people. It was the bite of the fleas that spread the plague germs to their human victims.

<sup>14</sup> There were house rats in every 14th-century city, so nobody was spared. The Black Death carried off king and commoner alike. It raged back and forth over Europe, on and off, for 200 years. Then gradually, it died away. (Some people think that the real end of the plague didn't come until the London Fire of 1666. That fire destroyed most of London, along with the rats, fleas, and germs that caused the plague.)

<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, during all the 200 years that the plague ravaged Europe, the cure had been at hand. The germs of the Black Death can be destroyed by the application of soap and water. ☛

*If you have been timed while reading this article, enter your reading time below. Then turn to the Words-per-Minute Table on page 195 and look up your reading speed (words per minute). Enter your reading speed on the graph on page 196.*

### Reading Time: Lesson 15

Minutes : Seconds

## A Finding the Main Idea

One statement below expresses the main idea of the article. One statement is too general, or too broad. The other statement explains only part of the article; it is too narrow. Label the statements using the following key:

M—Main Idea      B—Too Broad      N—Too Narrow

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. A deadly plague raced across Europe in the 14th century.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The Black Death, which killed millions of people in the 14th century, was spread by fleas.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Some people believed that the Black Death was caused by poisonous fumes escaping from the center of the earth.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 1.5 points for a correct M answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 5 points for each correct B or N answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Finding the Main Idea

## B Recalling Facts

How well do you remember the facts in the article? Put an X in the box next to the answer that correctly completes each statement about the article.

1. The Black Death raged back and forth in Europe for
  - ☐ a. 400 years.
  - ☐ b. 200 years.
  - ☐ c. 100 years.
2. Before the plague struck Europe, an Arab physician had noted that
  - ☐ a. there was a relationship between the plague and rats.
  - ☐ b. soap and water were effective against the plague.
  - ☐ c. there was no known cure for the disease.
3. The Tartar leader, Kipchak Janiberg, spread the plague by
  - ☐ a. bringing rats and fleas to Italy.
  - ☐ b. catapulting the bodies of his own men into an Italian trading colony.
  - ☐ c. infecting the waters of the Black Sea.
4. The Black Death got its name from the
  - ☐ a. Black Sea, where the Europeans first caught it.
  - ☐ b. color of the victim's skin.
  - ☐ c. Chinese, who first learned the horror of the plague.
5. The flagellants believed the plague was caused by
  - ☐ a. God's anger.
  - ☐ b. the close passage of Jupiter and Mars.
  - ☐ c. pigeons and puppies.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Total Score: Recalling Facts

## C Making Inferences

When you combine your own experience and information from a text to draw a conclusion that is not directly stated in that text, you are making an inference. Below are five statements that may or may not be inferences based on information in the article. Label the statements using the following key:

C—Correct Inference      F—Faulty Inference

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The plague was particularly bad in Smolensk, Russia.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Although doctors couldn't cure plague victims, they did know how to protect themselves from the disease.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The plague takes a long time to kill its victims.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. People infected by the disease were willing to try anything to survive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. European cities did not control the rat population.

Score 5 points for each correct answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score: Making Inferences**

## D Using Words Precisely

Each numbered sentence below contains an underlined word or phrase from the article. Following the sentence are three definitions. One definition is closest to the meaning of the underlined word. One definition is opposite or nearly opposite. Label those two definitions using the following key. Do not label the remaining definition.

C—Closest      O—Opposite or Nearly Opposite

1. One person in every three would die of the plague before it ran its course.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. started to occur
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. spread to Europe
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. came to an end
2. As people fled before the spreading plague, spouse abandoned spouse, and parents forsook children.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. abandoned
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. killed
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. kept
3. The Black Death derived its name from the color of the victim's skin in death....
  - \_\_\_\_\_ a. acquired
  - \_\_\_\_\_ b. questioned
  - \_\_\_\_\_ c. lost

4. People ate and drank concoctions of blood, goat urine, lizards, toads, and boils that had been dried and powdered.

\_\_\_\_\_ a. quarts  
 \_\_\_\_\_ b. mixtures  
 \_\_\_\_\_ c. separate drinks

5. The physician had noted that the plague broke out only after rats had come out of their holes to die in the open air.

\_\_\_\_\_ a. noticed  
 \_\_\_\_\_ b. ignored  
 \_\_\_\_\_ c. joked

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 3 points for each correct C answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ Score 2 points for each correct O answer.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Total Score: Using Words Precisely**

Enter the four total scores in the spaces below, and add them together to find your Reading Comprehension Score. Then record your score on the graph on page 197.

Score	Question Type	Lesson 15
_____	Finding the Main Idea	
_____	Recalling Facts	
_____	Making Inferences	
_____	Using Words Precisely	
_____	<b>Reading Comprehension Score</b>	

## Author's Approach

Put an X in the box next to the correct answer.

1. The author uses the first sentence of the article to
- ☐ a. inform the reader about the Black Death.
- ☐ b. convey a mood of fear.
- ☐ c. capture the reader's attention.

2. What does the author mean by the statement "Surprisingly, during all the 200 years that the plague ravaged Europe, the cure had been at hand"?

☐ a. For 200 years, the cure had been something that was readily available to everyone.

☐ b. Just before the plague died out, scientists discovered the cure for it.

☐ c. People were surprised to find that some scientists had known the cure for the plague all along.

3. From the statement "The flagellation made as much sense as some of the other cures proposed for the plague," you can conclude that the author wants the reader to think that

☐ a. flagellation was a good way to cure the plague.

☐ b. the other proposed cures were better than flagellation.

☐ c. flagellation and the other proposed cures were useless against the plague.