



# Black Death

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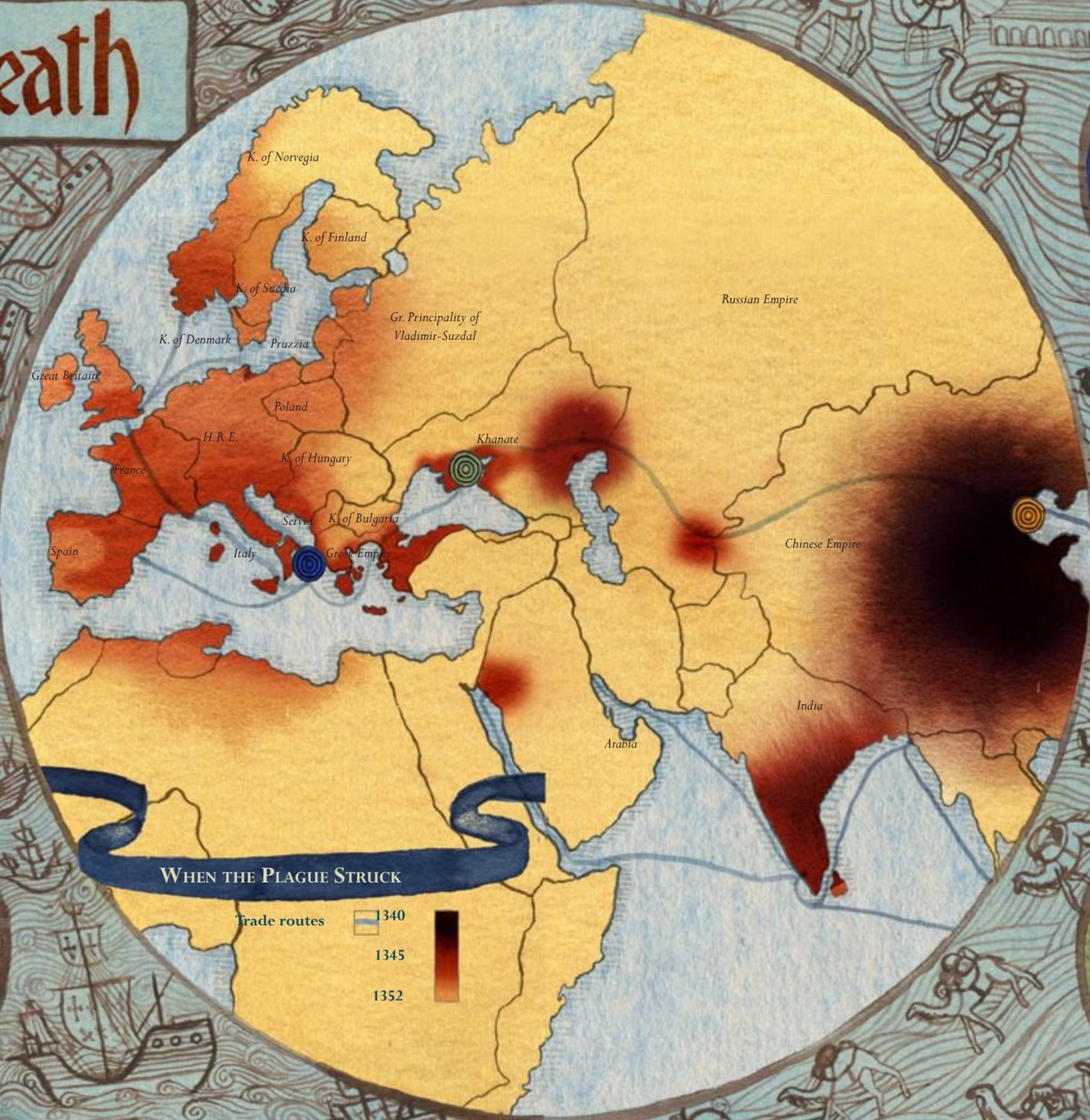
# Black Death

## WHERE DID IT START?

Although scientists still debate where the plague originated from, the outbreak in the 1300's started in China. It spread rapidly and whole villages were wiped out and burned in an attempt to halt the spread of the plague. However, since valuables were looted from plague-stricken corpses, the fleas that carried the disease found new homes. At this time, many European goods were traded with the Chinese through a post in the Black Sea. The plague spread through flea-infested rats, hiding in cargo being traded with Italy.

## CARRIERS

Rats may have spread the disease, but it was the fleas that travelled on them that infected people. Fleas carried the plague in their abdomens, and when they bit a human, the bite would be infected. People at the time had no idea how the plague spread.



WHEN THE PLAGUE STRUCK

Trade routes  
 1340  
 1345  
 1352



## FATAL VOYAGE

An Italian Merchant ship was the first recorded case of the plague in Europe. As the crew travelled home from the Black Sea, they all became ill and reached port on the verge of death. The whole city was evacuated, but the flea-covered rats infested the city.

## LEGEND OF THE PLAGUE

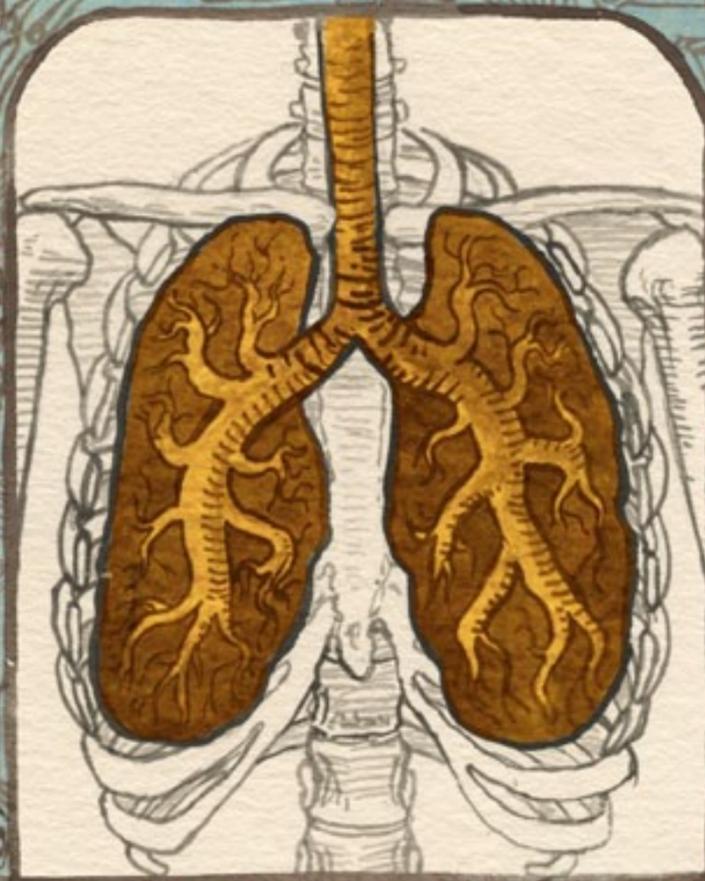
It's said that the plague spread to Europe when the Mongols attacked Caffa (a city on the Black Sea). The Mongols had been struck by the plague and were losing the siege of the city, so they catapulted the infected corpses over the walls in an early attempt at biological warfare.



**T**he Black Death is widely known as the bubonic plague because of the lumps that appeared on the plague victims called “buboes” (Greek for “groin”). Buboes are enlargements of the lymph nodes in the neck, armpit and groin regions. Buboes are filled with foul-smelling pus. If the bubo bursts on its own, it’s a sign of a possible recovery. Because of this realization, doctors started bursting the buboes of plague victims- sadly, this often led to worse infections. A bubonic plague victim had a 50-70% chance of survival.

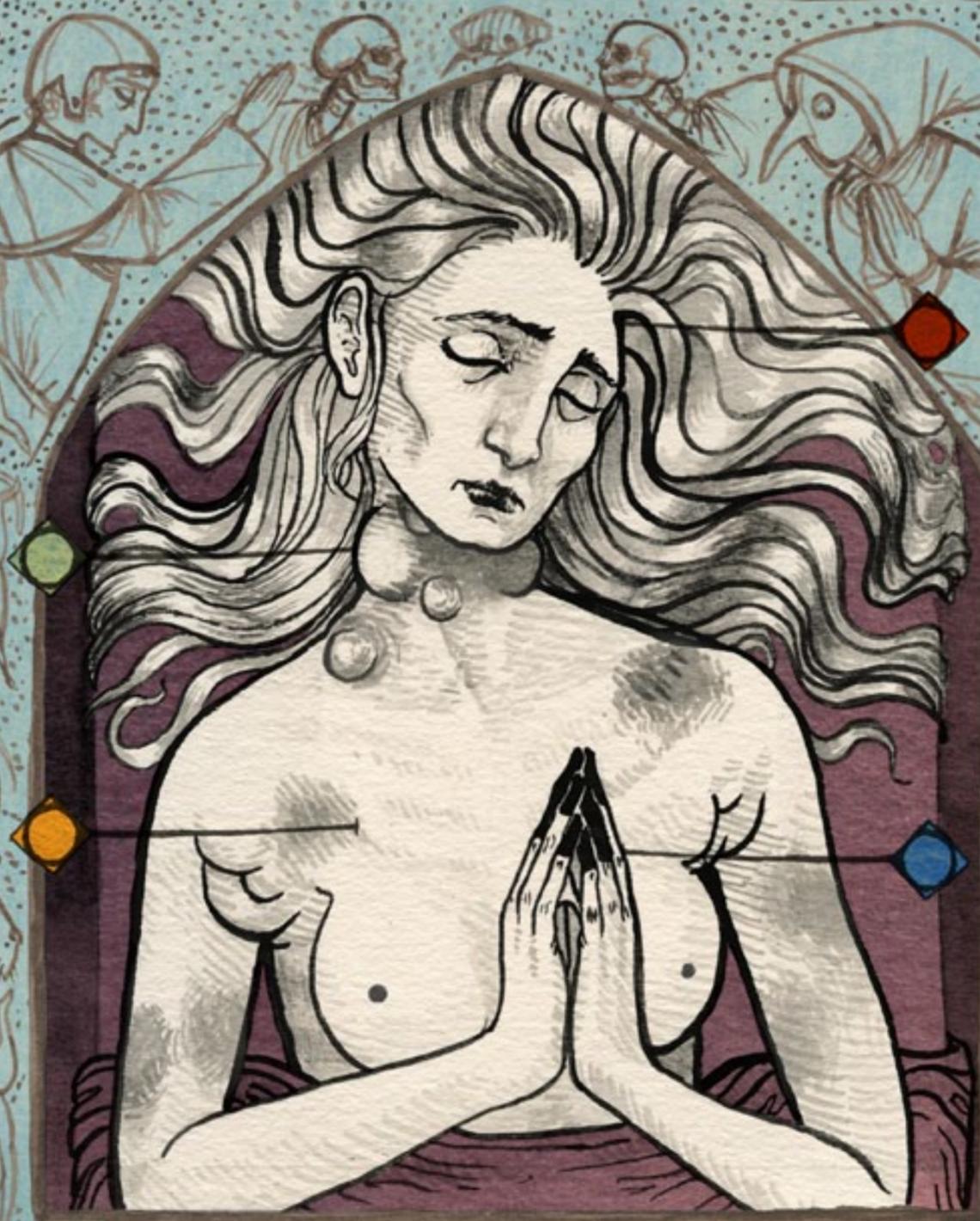


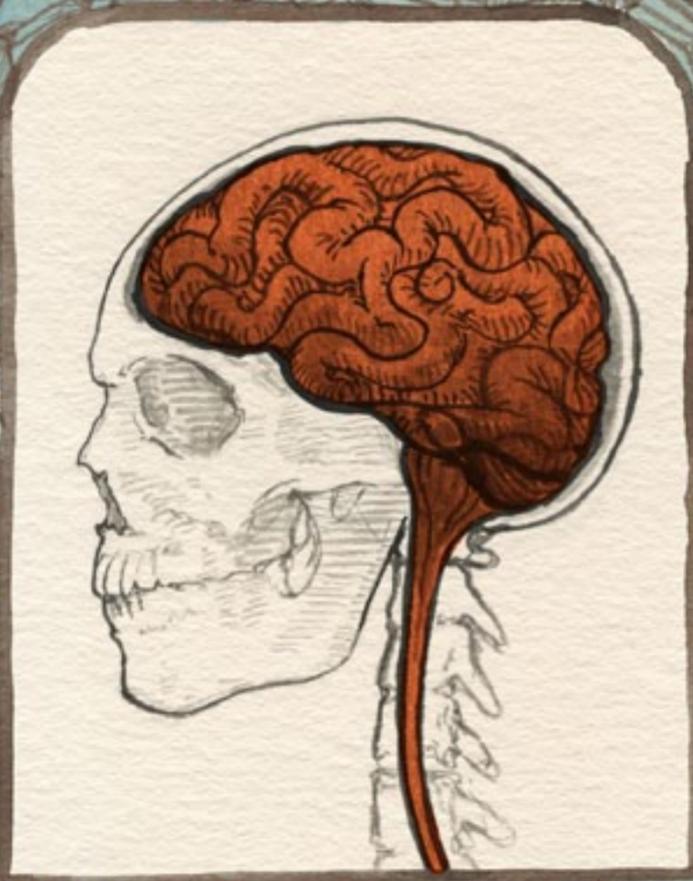
**A**nother strain of the Black Death was the pneumonic plague, which attacked the lungs of the victim. This form of the plague was less common, but far more dangerous than the bubonic plague. The infected person would spread the disease through the air they breathed, making quarantine an absolute necessity. Another rare strain of the plague was the septicemic plague, which infected the blood. This was spread through the bite of a diseased flea or rat. If someone acquired the pneumonic or septicemic plague, they had a 99% chance of death, and often within the next 5 days.



## **T**HE SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of the plague present themselves within 2-5 days of contamination. Once the symptoms presented themselves, the disease progressed rapidly and many died within a week of contracting it. The first symptoms were a red discoloration at the point of infection, fever, weakness and headache. Then would arrive muscle aches and neurological problems. After that, the buboes would appear, accompanying gangrene and hemorrhages under the skin leading to dark blotches. Eventually, the nervous system would collapse, serious blood clots and internal bleeding would cause the patient to die, a welcome escape from the horrors of plague.





**T**he plague affects the nervous system of its victims, causing it to collapse. This caused extreme pain and strange neurological and psychological disorders. Plague victims suffered from insomnia, stupor and delirium. The septicemic plague caused blood clots that could sometimes lead to brain damage (although it was short-lived) and strokes.



**G**angrene is a necrosis of the tissue in the extremities. This is often due to blood not being able to circulate in the affected areas, leaving them to putrefy. It appears in plague victims not only in the extremities but all over the body, discoloring the skin wherever the blood clots. The name “Black Death” comes from this gruesome phenomenon. It is said that the rhyme “Ring Around the Rosy” refers to the plague. The rosy would be the discoloured area; the “pocket full of posies” refers to flowers carried by many to drive away the stench; and “ashes, ashes, we all fall down” is about the cremation of corpses.

**C**URES although no one knew how to cure the plague, many people had their own home remedies. Vinegar was used as a cleanser, and many believed that it would kill the plague. Rose, lavender, sage and bay and other sweet-smelling herbs were used for head pain. Stomach pain and nausea was treated with wormwood, balm and mint. Breathing problems were treated with liquorice and comfrey. Bloodletting, a favourite cure for practically any ailment was used liberally. The blood extracted from the victim was foul-smelling, blackish, and was often accompanied by greenish pus.



Another supposed “cure” was the application of a live chicken to buboes. The tail feathers were said to draw out the disease. Doctors also used the feathers of the chicken to lance the buboes. Another home remedy was to make the victim sweat, and then apply a dead pigeon to the bubo. I’m sure you can imagine, these treatments caused more harm than good.



## **P**LAGUE LABORERS

In the Elizabethan Era, plague doctors wore robes with pointed hoods. They dressed in dark colours with leather gloves and boots. Their most striking characteristic are the masks they wore that had a long beak attached. The beaks were filled with bergamot oil and helped the doctors from catching the airborne septicemic plague. Their all-covering clothing helped protect them from flea bites and contamination through human contact. They carried healing amulets and herbs at their waist. Ground up toads and amulets of dried blood warded off disease and gave the wearer good luck.

The dead were often left out in the streets where they would be collected by death cart labourers. These men carted them to mass graves that they had dug. These labourers were not well paid, and they had a very high mortality rate. People were forced into the job, and many recovered plague victims found themselves in this position.



## **E**VERYDAY LIFE

In these unsteady times, religion reigned supreme. Groups of hundreds of protestant men called the Flagellant Brethren would travel from city to city, preaching about the sins of the Jews. They would beat themselves with scourges with iron spikes, in hopes that their suffering would stop the destruction around them. Because of the anti-Semitic preaching of the time blaming Jews for the plague, thousands upon thousands of Jews were tortured and burned to death. During this time, so many people died that the churches could not keep up with the demand for last rites services. Pope Clement VI made an announcement that anyone who died of the plague was absolved of their sins.

While some peoples' lives revolved around penance, many took the opposite approach and embraced what little time they had left. But everyday life during the plague was hard to enjoy.

Victims of the plague were quarantined in their houses- boarded up from the outside. Victims would lower baskets for food that would be filled by people called Watchmen. Crosses were painted on the doors of the plagued and sometimes when a person died, the house itself was burnt to the ground. Although there were death cart laborers, there were still piles of dead people in the streets, left there because of a lack of resources or fear of infection.

Because poverty was so widespread, some dared to steal from the diseased corpses left in the streets or mass graves. The punishment for this was severe, and some thieves were flung into the graves themselves.

A huge labour shortage occurred in the 1300's as a result of the plague, and not enough crops were being planted and harvested to feed the population. Widespread famine only worsened the woes of an already struggling population, and people became more and more discontent with their lives. Although laborers were working overtime, their wages weren't increased. This resulted in peasant revolts, which led to a better standard of living for the working class.

Part of the discontent that had been brewing can be attributed to the 100 Years War. The war had started in 1337, but as the Black Death reached Europe in 1349, the death toll rose dramatically. Poverty, malnutrition, plague and war took their toll. France, was hit especially hard, as they were already losing the war to England. France lost about 50% of their total population in just 5 years.



## **A**FTERMATH

The 14th century Black Plague killed approximately 30-60% of Europe's population. The map below shows the worst affected areas in Europe. The plague still exists today in many. There are between 1000-3000 cases every year worldwide.

