**Background Reading – The Black Death**

The Black Death arrived in Europe by sea in October 1347 when 12 Genoese trading ships docked at the Sicilian port of Messina (Italy) after a long journey through the Black Sea. The people who gathered on the docks to greet the ships were met with a horrifying surprise: Most of the sailors aboard the ships were dead, and those who were still alive were very ill. They were feverish, unable to keep food down and in terrible pain. Strangest of all, they were covered in mysterious black boils that oozed blood and pus and gave their illness its name: the “Black Death.” The Sicilian authorities quickly ordered the fleet of “death ships” out of the harbor, but it was too late: Over the next five years, the mysterious Black Death would kill more than 75 - 200 million people in Europe – at least one-third of the continent’s population.

Even before the “death ships” pulled into port at Messina, many Europeans had heard rumors about a “Great Pestilence” that was carving a deadly path across the trade routes of the Near and Far East. (Early in the 1340s, the disease had struck China, India, Persia, Syria and Egypt.) However, they were unprepared for the horrible reality of the Black Death. “In men and women alike,” the Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio wrote, “at the beginning of the malady (illness), certain swellings, either on the groin or under the armpits…waxed (grew) to the bigness of a common apple, others to the size of an egg, some more and some less, and these they called plague-boils.” Blood and pus seeped out of these strange swellings, which were followed by a host of other unpleasant symptoms–fever, chills, vomiting, diarrhea, terrible aches and pains–and then, soon after, death. The Black Death was terrifyingly contagious: “the mere touching of the clothes,” wrote Boccaccio, “appeared to itself to communicate the malady to the toucher.” The disease was also incredibly efficient. People who were perfectly healthy when they went to bed at night could be dead by morning.

**Understanding the Black Death**

Today, scientists understand that the Black Death, now known as the plague, is spread by a bacteria called Yersina pestis. (The French biologist Alexandre Yersin discovered this germ at the end of the 19th century.) They know that the bacteria travels from person to person pneumonically (through the air), as well as through the bite of infected fleas and rats. Both of these pests could be found almost everywhere in medieval Europe, but they were particularly at home aboard ships of all kinds--which is how the deadly plague made its way through one European port city after another. Not long after it struck Messina, the Black Death spread to the port of Marseilles in France and the port of Tunis in North Africa. Then it reached Rome and Florence, two cities at the center of an elaborate web of trade routes. By the middle of 1348, the Black Death had struck Paris, Bordeaux, Lyon and London.

Today, this grim sequence of events is terrifying but understandable. In the middle of the 14th century, however, there seemed to be no explanation for it. No one knew exactly how the Black Death was transmitted from one patient to another–according to one doctor, for example, “instantaneous death occurs when the aerial spirit escaping from the eyes of the sick man strikes the healthy person standing near and looking at the sick” – in other words, they believed you caught it by looking at an infected person. Some believed the disease was brought about by God as a punishment for mankind’s evil deeds. No one knew how to treat or cure it. Physicians relied on crude and unsophisticated techniques such as bloodletting and boil-lancing (practices that were dangerous as well as unsanitary) and superstitious practices such as burning aromatic herbs and bathing in rosewater or vinegar.

Meanwhile, in a panic, healthy people did all they could to avoid the sick. Doctors refused to see patients; priests refused to administer last rites. Shopkeepers closed stores. Many people fled the cities for the countryside, but even there they could not escape the disease. It affected cows, sheep, goats, pigs and chickens as well as people. In fact, so many sheep died that one of the consequences of the Black Death was a European wool shortage.  And many people, desperate to save themselves, even abandoned their sick and dying loved ones. “Thus doing,” Boccaccio wrote, “each thought to secure immunity for himself.”

Source: History.com staff (2010) http://www.history.com/topics/black-death

**Discussion Questions**

1) How did the lack of knowledge about diseases affect the spread of the plague?

2) What were some examples of their lack of knowledge?

3) Was there anything that the people did correctly?

4) Do you think it’s possible that something like this could happen today?

5) If some new disease struck today, what might we do differently than the people of the Middle Ages?