The Black Death
By Sharon Fabian

A frightening rumor was spreading across Europe in 1347. It was told in horrifying detail by travelers returning from the East.

According to the rumor, a mysterious force was killing people. It wasn't like any ordinary disease. A person hardly had time to become sick, and before you knew it, he was gone. And as if that wasn't bad enough, this mysterious killer disposed of its victims in a most grisly manner. There were reports of bodies exploding with the foul sickness. Victims, as soon as they began to feel sick, reportedly gave off such a stench that no one would go near them.

Were the reports true? What was this mysterious killer? And what made it spread?

People in medieval Europe soon found out the answer to the first question. The reports were true. An unknown but gruesome sickness was spreading across Europe, and it was taking the lives of its victims. The plague spread gradually, making its way across Europe at the rate of a few miles each day.

As the plague spread, peasants abandoned their villages and fled, just as they would if an invading army was approaching.

What about the second question? What was this horrible killer? Scholars at the University of Paris tried to find the answer. Their conclusions were based on the best knowledge available at the time. They blamed the pestilence on a combination of the earthquakes that had shaken the continent around that time and the forces of astrology. They hypothesized that storms created by an unusual alignment of the planets had spread the evil forces released by the earthquakes.

Before they could continue their investigations, many of the scholars were also struck down by the plague.

The plague was actually a contagious disease like the flu.

The answer to the third question? Germs. Medieval men and women didn't know what we know today - that diseases are spread by germs. The plague was spread from Asia to Europe, and then across Europe, by passing germs. It seems that the germs had lived on rats for many years. Fleas that lived on the rats could pass the germs from one creature to another. After some of the infected rats made their way to Europe in the cargo hold of a trading ship, the fleas began to bite, not just other rats, but people too.

The flea bite passed the plague germs into a person's bloodstream. It caused symptoms that we all recognize from milder illnesses that are common today: headaches, chills, fever, and nausea. But the Black Death didn't stop there. The form called the bubonic plague, probably the most common one, caused large swellings to appear at the site of the flea bite, often in an enclosed area of the body such as an armpit. These swellings, filled with infection, turned black and became as large as an egg. Soon, they burst open. Soon after that, the person died.

The Black Death was a painful way to die. It was also disgusting; an infected person smelled so bad that no one would go near him. As a result, a sick person became an outcast, and often, no one would care for him.

People tried to control the epidemic. They burned down houses and even whole villages infected by the plague, but their efforts had little effect.

The plague had arrived in Europe in 1347, and by 1348, it had made its way across the whole continent to England. Within a few years, about 25 million people had died. Thirty percent or more of Europe's population had been wiped out. After all of the invasions and wars that had killed so many people in the Middle Ages, the Black Death turned out to be the biggest killer of all.
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Questions

1. The first reports of the Black Death came from ______.
   A. travelers who had been to the East
   B. farmers
   C. monks
   D. doctors in medieval hospitals

2. The Black Death lasted for ______ years.
   A. 20
   B. 50
   C. many
   D. a few

3. The Black Death was spread by ______.
   A. food
   B. germs
   C. plants
   D. chemicals

4. Another name for the Black Death is ______.
   A. plague
   B. radiation
   C. cancer
   D. pneumonia

5. Once people realized that the Black Death was spreading across Europe, they began to ______.
   A. sleep
   B. take medicine
   C. flee
   D. call their doctors

6. The Black Death killed about ______ of the population of Europe.
   A. 1/3
   B. half
   C. 1/30
   D. 100%

7. ______ were the carriers that passed the Black Death germs from rats to humans.
   A. dogs
   B. mosquitoes
   C. fleas
   D. mice

8. ______ blamed the Black Death on earthquakes and astrology.
   A. scholars
   B. peasants
   C. sailors
   D. doctors

Suppose that the people of the Middle Ages had understood that contagious diseases were spread by germs. What might they have done differently to slow the spread of the Black Death?
In recent years, we have heard news reports of a potential worldwide epidemic of bird flu - some strains of the flu spread by birds. How is this situation different from epidemic known as the Black Death that spread across Europe in the Middle Ages? (You may have to do some research.)