

Black Death Station #2

Scientists at the time did not know the real cause of the Black Death, some blamed 'corrupt air' or the movements of the planets for the outbreak. Some people even thought that the Black Death was a sign of God's anger.

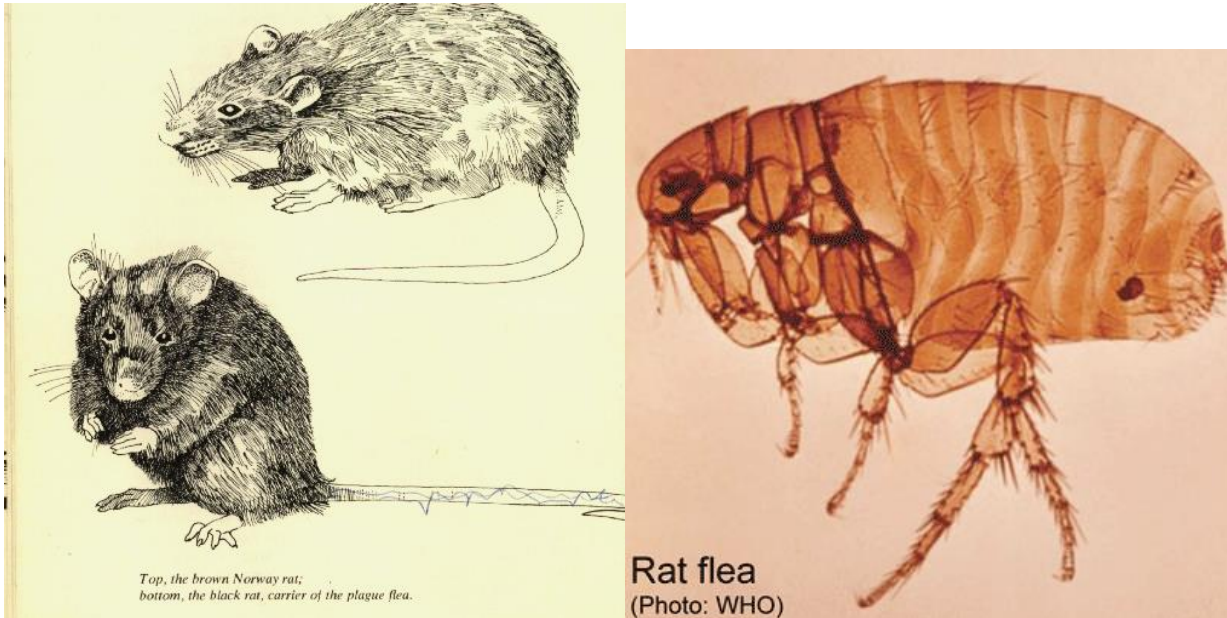
#1. Read your textbook page 166 "Persecution of the Jews" and the source below.

Primary Source: Jean de Venette on the Progress of the Black Death (France)

Some said that this pestilence [disease] was caused by infection of the air and waters, since there was at this time no famine nor lack of food supplies, but on the contrary great abundance. As a result of this theory of infected water and air as the source of the plague the Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting wells and water and corrupting the air. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account. In Germany and other parts of the world where Jews lived, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately. For mothers hurled their children first into the fire that they might not be baptized and then leaped in after them to burn with their husbands and children. It is said that many bad Christians were found who in like manner put poison into wells. But in truth, such poisonings, [if they even happened], could not have caused so great a plague nor have infected so many people. There were other causes; for example, the will of God and the corrupt humors [see #2] and evil in air and earth. Perhaps the poisonings, if they actually took place in some localities, reinforced [added to] these causes.

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#2.



According to scientists today (unknown at the time), the plague is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria known as *Yersinia pestis*. Plague has a high fatality rate and has been described for centuries. Transmission occurs via fleas that feed on infected rodents. People contract the bacteria through bites of fleas that have fed on infected rodents. Humans can also develop the infection from handling fluids or tissues from infected animals. People with the pneumonic form of plague can transmit the infection to other humans by coughing infectious droplets into the air. Plague is still with us in many parts of the world, although now antibiotics can halt its course.

Some historians and scientists question these findings, because *Yersinia pestis* does not spread as easily or quickly today as it did at the time. It may be the same pathogen, but a different strain of the bacteria, which was more aggressive in the past.

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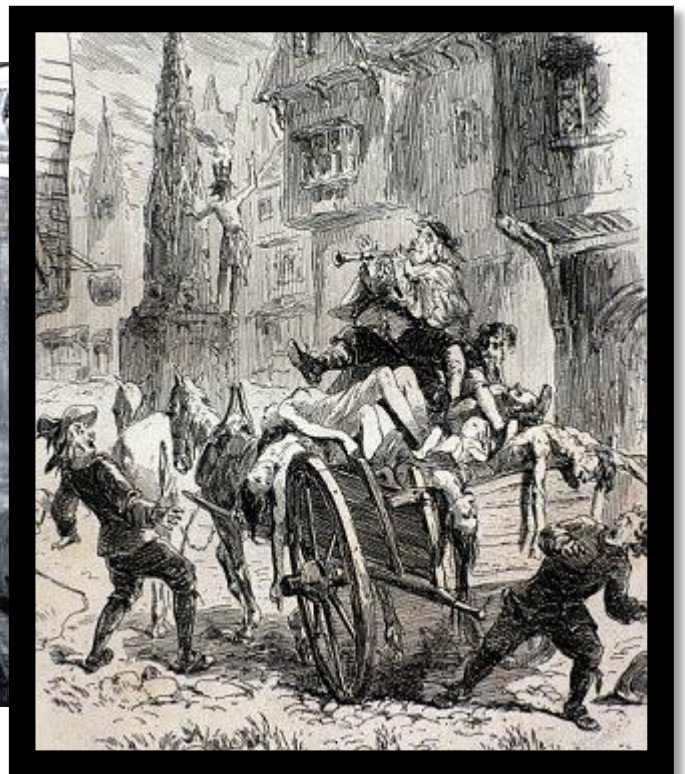
#3.

Why did the plague spread so quickly?

The disposal of bodies was very crude and helped to spread the disease still further as those who handled the dead bodies did not protect themselves in any way.

Primary Source Excerpt: Boccaccio's *Decameron*

“Many others, who met their ends in their own houses, would first come to the attention of their neighbors because of the stench of their rotting corpses more than anything else; and with these and others all dying, there were corpses everywhere. And the neighbors always followed a particular routine, more out of fear of being corrupted by the corpse than out of charity for the deceased. These, either by themselves or with the help of others when available, would carry the corpse of the recently deceased from the house and leave it lying in the street outside where, especially in the morning, a countless number of corpses could be seen lying about. Funeral biers would come, and if there was a shortage of funeral biers, some other flat table or something or other would be used to place the corpses on. Nor did it infrequently happen that a single funeral bier would carry two or three people at the same time, but rather one frequently saw on a single bier a husband and a wife, two or three brothers, a father and a son, or some other relatives.”

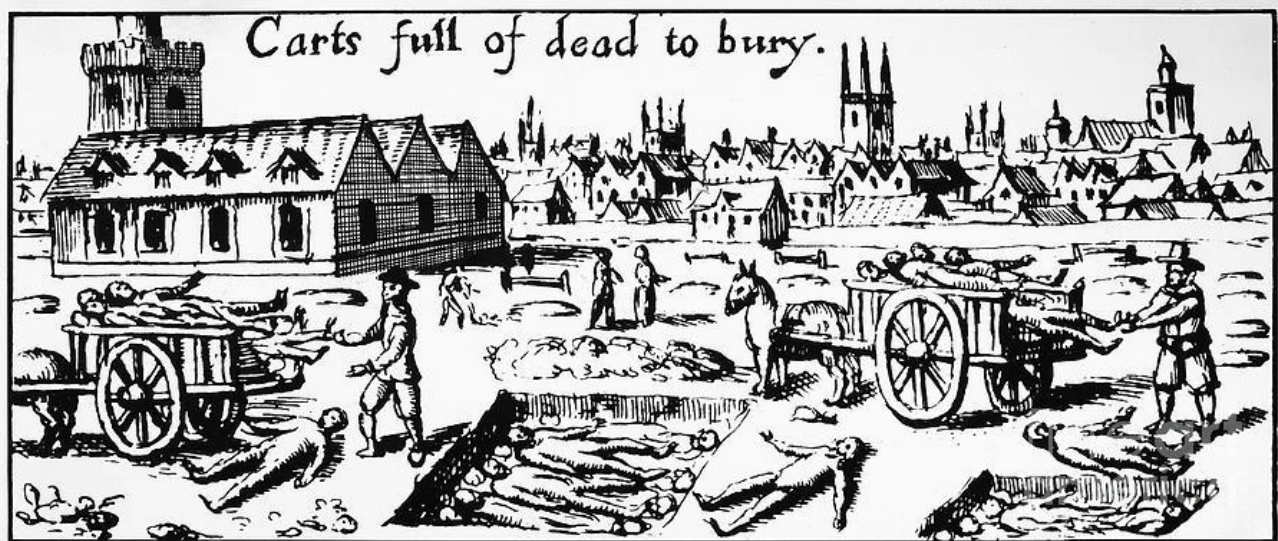


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#4.

Primary Source Excerpt: Boccaccio's *Decameron*

Nor were there ever tears or candles or any company honoring the dead; things had reached such a point, that people cared no more for the death of other people than they did for the death of a goat: for this thing, death, which even the wise never accept with patience, even though it occur rarely and relatively unobtrusively, had appeared manifestly to even the smallest intellects, but the catastrophe was so unimaginably great that nobody really cared. There was such a multitude of corpses that arrived at all churches every day and every hour, that sacred burial ground ran out, which was especially a problem if each person wanted their own plot in accordance with ancient custom. When the cemeteries were for the most part full, they excavated great pits in which they'd place hundreds of newly arrived corpses, and each corpse would be covered with a thin layer of dirt until the pit was filled.



A mass grave for plague victims recently found in Italy