

The Black Plague: Fact and Fiction!!

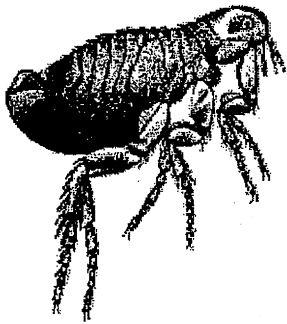
Many rumors, superstitions, misconceptions and "scientific explanations" were produced to try to explain the origin, or beginning, of the Plague. (Read the two paragraphs at the bottom of the page by the flea to find out what the Plague was!)

People thought that it began in China. It didn't. They thought this because reports of millions dead in China arrived in Europe at the same time as reports of the plague striking India. Since India is bordered by China, they believed that the plague started in China and spread west towards Europe. Actually, the deaths in China had occurred over a ten year period well before the plague began. The deaths in China were a result of a drought, followed by a great famine followed by diseases.

One story that people believed at the time sounds like a fantasy or science fiction story to us today. This account tells of a terrible three day storm over a province in India. On the first day poisonous creatures fell from the sky as rain: toads, snakes, scorpions, and lizards. On the next day thunder and lightning split the skies and sheets of fire descended from the heavens mixed with giant hail stones which killed many people. On the third day a great amount of stinking smoke and fire rained from heaven and killed all in its path. This smoke and poisonous air was believed to infect the rest of India and drifted westwards towards Europe infecting all in its path!

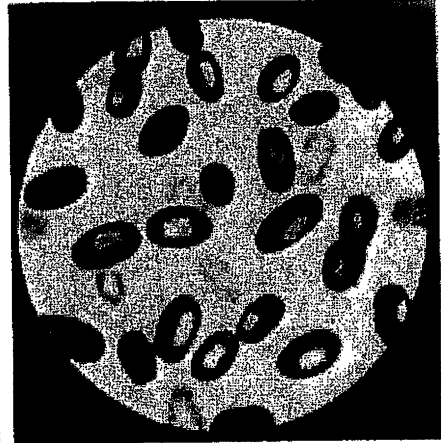
In France, the medical college was asked to come up with an explanation. After much thought and discussion, they announced that three planets had lined up in the heavens: Mars, Jupiter and Saturn and this caused the plague to occur. This was the official scientific theory accepted throughout Europe at the time!

Almost everyone believed that the plague was a punishment from God because man had been wicked. They believed that the end of the world was about to happen. As you can probably tell by the myths and superstitions surrounding the origins of the Plague in Renaissance Europe, people had no idea of how the disease was really spread. It was not until 500 years later in the late 1800's that scientists discovered that rats and fleas were the carriers of the disease which became known as the Bubonic Plague.



The infection was spread from person to person by contact with infected bodily fluids or by the bite of fleas from an infected host such as a rat. Fleas are parasites, or animals which live off of the blood of other animals. The animal the parasite lives on is called the host. Thus, the rat would become infected with the disease, the flea would drink its blood, jump off, bite a person and infect the person with the rat's diseased blood. In a like manner, if a healthy person came in contact with the bodily fluids of the infected person, s/he would contract the disease also.

There were two different forms of the disease that existed and spread at the same time— the Bubonic Plague and the Pneumonic Plague. The Bubonic Plague was caused by bacteria. These bacteria are shown in the picture to the left. They attacked a human's lymph nodes and caused them to swell to the size of lemons. These swellings were called Bubo. The victim's temperature would rise to about 104 degrees Fahrenheit within the space of a day or so. The victim would become very ill and nauseous. Blood vessels would break under the skin and internal bleeding would occur. The blood would dry beneath the skin and appear black. Hence the disease became known as the Black Death. The second form of the disease spread even more quickly and caused death to occur even more rapidly. The Pneumonic Plague attacked the lungs and was spread by coughing or sneezing. Either form of the plague generally killed the victim within three days. Very few people recovered from the Plague once they caught it. From start to finish, the Plague killed about 1/3 of the population of Europe and Asia within the space of 2-3 years.



1. Why did people think the plague began in China?
2. What was the real cause of the deaths in China?
3. What did people believe was the cause of all of the deaths?
4. Explain what the medical college in France thought caused the deaths?
5. What is the real cause of the Bubonic Plague?
6. Why was this disease called the Black Death?
7. How long did someone typically live once they caught the Black Death?

8. How is the Bubonic Plague different from the Pneumonic Plague?
9. Why is it important for us to know what caused the Black Death?
10. What is the main idea of this article?
11. Why does the article include illustrations?