Origins of the Plague
- The Black Death erupted in the Gobi Desert in the late 1320s. No one really knows why. The plague bacillus was alive and active long before that; indeed Europe itself had suffered an epidemic in the 6th century. But the disease had lain relatively dormant in the succeeding centuries. We know that the climate of Earth began to cool in the 14th century, and perhaps this so-called little Ice Age had something to do with it.
- Whatever the reason, we know that the outbreak began there and spread outward. While it did go west, it spread in every direction, and the Asian nations suffered as cruelly as anywhere. In China, for example, the population dropped from around 125 million to 90 million over the course of the 14th c.

The Plague Approaches Europe
- The plague moved along the caravan routes toward the West. By 1345 the plague was on the lower Volga River. By 1346 it was in the Caucasus and the Crimea. By 1347 it was in Constantinople.
- It hit Alexandria in the autumn of that year, and by spring 1348, a thousand people a day were dying there. In Cairo the count was seven times that.
- The disease travelled by ship as readily as by land -- more readily -- and it was no sooner in the eastern Mediterranean than it was in the western end as well. Already in 1347, the plague had hit Sicily.

Arrival in the West
- It reached Cyprus late in summer 1347. In Oct. 1347, a Genoese fleet landed at Messina, Sicily. By winter it was in Italy. January 1348, the plague was in Marseilles. It reached Paris in the spring 1348 and England in September 1348.
- Moving along the Rhine trade routes, the plague reached Germany in 1348, and the Low Countries the same year. 1348 was the worst of the plague years.
- It took longer to reach the periphery of Europe. Norway was hit in May 1349. The eastern European countries were not reached until 1350, and Russia not until 1351.
- Because the disease tended to follow trade routes, and to concentrate in cities, it followed a circuitous route: the Near East, the western Mediterranean, then into northern Europe and finally back into Russia. The progress of the plague very neatly describes the geography of medieval trade.

About the Disease
- What was this disease? Bubonic plague is the medical term. It is a bacillus, an organism, most usually carried by rodents. Fleas infest the animal (rats, but other rodents as well), and these fleas move freely over to human hosts.
- The flea then regurgitates the blood from the rat into the human, infecting the human. The rat dies. The human dies. The flea lives a long and happy life. Nature has a morbid sense of humor.
- Symptoms include high fevers and aching limbs and vomiting of blood. Most characteristic is a swelling of the lymph nodes. These glands can be found in the neck, armpits and groin. The swelling protrudes and is easily visible; its blackish coloring gives the disease its name: the Black Death.
- The swellings continue to expand until they eventually burst, with death following soon after. The whole process, from first symptoms of fever and aches, to final expiration, lasts only three or four days. The swiftness of the disease, the terrible pain, the grotesque appearance of the victims, all served to make the plague especially terrifying.