Apply your knowledge

1. a Write a headline for a newspaper article about life in the 14th century. Your headline should capture what you consider to be the most important aspect of this topic.
   b In two sentences, explain your choice of the most important aspect of this topic.
   c As a class, discuss what each student wrote as their headline, and why.
   d After discussing this as a class, would you change your headline or keep it the same?

2. Research a holy day that was celebrated during medieval times. (Choose one that is not mentioned in the text.)
   a Why was this day celebrated?
   b Does this day have any connection to a similar celebratory day in modern times?
   c Do any cultures still celebrate this day in its original format?
   d Elise takes you to Medieval Europe to watch celebrations on your chosen holy day. You can participate if you like. In your travel blog, describe the events of the day so that a reader will understand how that holy day was commonly celebrated.

What is the Black Death?

The Black Death is a deadly disease that broke out in Asia, Africa and Europe between the late 1320s CE and 1352 CE. Initially, people did not refer to the disease as the Black Death— it was given this name many years later in the 1830s CE, in reference to the black colour of bulges, or buboes, that appeared on the skin of victims.

Causes and human transmission

No one can be certain exactly what caused the Black Death, though its symptoms resemble the modern disease known as the plague, which occurs in three different forms and is caused by the spread of infection by the bacterium known as Yersinia pestis. Based on medical research conducted on an outbreak in the late 1890s CE, the Black Death is thought to have been a combination of the two most common forms of plague: bubonic plague and pneumonic plague.
Pneumonic plague is the second form of plague, and the bacterium is transmitted through the air and bodily fluids, much like the common cold. It infects victims through the lungs and is much more deadly than the bubonic plague.

As the Black Death was a combination of these two forms of plague, it spread via fleas on rats as well as directly between people.

**Symptoms**

The first symptoms of the Black Death included swelling of the tongue, fever and headaches, along with the emergence of large bulges on the skin, known as buboes. Buboes most commonly appeared under the arms, on the neck or in the groin. Initially, the buboes appeared as a red colour; then they turned purple; then, finally, they turned black, giving the Black Death its name. These first symptoms were followed by vomiting, pain and loss of motor control—so much so that people could not walk or move properly and their strange movements became known as the 'dance of death'.

All these symptoms appeared rapidly and most people who caught the Black Death died within a few days.

**Origins**

It is difficult to figure out exactly where the Black Death originated as there are no Medieval Asian sources that recount it. What is known is that the disease came from one of two regions in Asia: the steppe region in Central Asia or the Gobi Desert in the foothills of the Himalayas. What is common to both of these regions is that they were under Mongol rule at the time, and were in the heart of Asia.
The spread of the Black Death

Asia

The initial outbreak of the Black Death was in Central Asia sometime in the late 1320s CE. The disease spread quickly, most likely through the trade routes of Asia, to the far reaches of China in the south and Crimea in the west. The effects on the people of Asia were particularly devastating.

Africa

The disease continued to spread rapidly through infected merchants on trade routes. Once it reached the ports it would be able to travel across the seas on merchants’ ships. In autumn of 1347 CE, the Black Death reached Africa through Egypt’s largest port of Alexandria. In Alexandria, it killed 100 to 200 people each day in 1347 CE and, by the summer of 1348 CE, the number reportedly reached 1000 per day. From Alexandria, it travelled to Cairo and then throughout the Middle East with further devastating effects.

Europe

Kaffa: how the Black Death reached Europe

The Black Death is thought to have entered Europe through the port of Sicily in 1347 CE, via Genoese merchant ships arriving from the city of Kaffa in the Crimea (near present-day Ukraine). In the 1340s CE, Kaffa was a fortified city under the control of merchants from the Italian city of Genoa, who had established and maintained a trading port there. Kaffa was attacked by Mongol armies intent on taking the city for themselves, and a siege ensued. During that time, members of the Mongol army began dying of the Black Death. With their army being struck down at a rapid rate, the Mongols employed a new strategy—they catapulted the bodies of the dead over the walls of Kaffa. Contact with the bodies carrying the plague bacterium caused the city to become infected, and many Genoese also died. Those that survived fled the city on their ships, taking with them a deadly passenger: the Black Death.

The fleeing Genoese landed in the port of Messina in Sicily. In turn, the Sicilian people quickly became infected and closed their port to all ships. But it was too late to stop the Black Death—it spread throughout the Sicilian population and then beyond, into wider Europe.

The spread of the Black Death across Europe

Towards the end of 1347 CE, the Black Death was spreading quickly across Europe by land and sea. It reached the city of Constantinople in late 1347 CE. Constantinople was an important trading port, so the disease easily entered this port and, once there, people travelling from this port took it with them to other parts of Europe and the Mediterranean.

In the spring of 1348 CE, Southern France and most of Italy were suffering. Much of Spain was also infected in 1348 CE and, later that year, the plague reached England by sea. In 1349 CE it spread across England and to the other kingdoms of the British Isles and finally across the North Sea to Bergen. Germany was also affected in 1349 CE. By 1350 CE, the rest of Scandinavia, Slavic Europe, and Russia had all suffered. By 1352 CE, there were only a few small pockets of Europe that were not affected, most notably a large part of Poland.
It so happened that in the month of October in the year of our Lord 1347, around the first of that month, twelve Genoese galleys, fleeing our Lord’s wrath which came down upon them for their misdeeds, put in at the port of the city of Messina [in Sicily]. They brought with them a plague that they carried down to the very marrow of their bones, so that if anyone so much as spoke to them, he was infected with a mortal sickness which brought an immediate death that he could in no way avoid.

**SOURCE 10.11** Michele da Piazza, an Italian chronicler and physician during the years of the Black Death in Italy, wrote an account of the Black Death’s entry into Europe in his work Cronaca in the 1300s CE.

**The role of trade**

One of the most difficult questions to answer is how the Black Death spread so quickly, though it is thought that trade and the trade routes played a major role in this. The vast Mongol Empire under Genghis Khan developed a trade system that allowed goods to be moved with caravans from China across the Middle East, along a route known as the Silk Road. This route was very popular and used very heavily. The trade route developed by the Mongols can account for the initial rapid spread of the disease from China across land to the sea ports in the west. Once goods reached the sea, they travelled along sea trade routes to ports throughout the known world. These ports met up with other land trade routes, and in this way the spread of the disease continued.

When we map the spread of the disease, it becomes obvious that the land and sea trade routes were significant in enabling the rapid spread of the Black Death (see the map at the beginning of this chapter). It is interesting to note that there were not many trade routes in the region in and around Poland—and a large part of Poland remained unaffected by the Black Death.

**SOURCE 10.12** The major medieval trading routes and the products traded
Where did it start?

Historians have, for many years, believed that the plague first came from China, or some other part of Asia, and then spread across the Silk Road trade routes to Europe and North Africa. Historical records show that there had been outbreaks of the plague in several places in Asia. Sources from China and Mongolia describe a devastating outbreak of plague in the 1320s.

It seems that the plague then spread from China to India on merchant ships. According to some estimates, as many as 25 million people died of the plague in Asia and India before it reached Europe. The horror made its way to Mecca in 1349, perhaps spread by merchants and pilgrims from India who travelled regularly to the holy city.

The plague first reached Europe though the port of Messina in Sicily in October 1347, most likely on trading ships that came from ports in the Black Sea. These ships carried goods such as silk and porcelain that had been brought overland from China, along the Silk Road, to the Black Sea (see the map ‘The spread of the Black Death in Asia and the Middle East’ above). The people of Messina realised very quickly that a terrible and deadly disease had come aboard the ships, and the ships and all the surviving crew members were expelled from the port. But it was too late. The rats and fleas on the ship had escaped. Plague spread quickly through the city, resulting in many people running away to the countryside. They thought that they were escaping
the plague but they were actually spreading it throughout Sicily. Meanwhile, the trading ships that had been expelled from Messina sailed around the Mediterranean, spreading plague to the islands of Corsica and Sardinia as well as the North African city of Tunis.

The plague ravaged the city of Sarai in the Mongol Empire and then spread to the Italian trading port at Tana on the coast. In November 1347, the Tartars attacked the European merchants there and chased them to their fortress at Caffa. The Tartars laid siege to Caffa but this ended when they were struck by the plague. The last thing the Tartars did, before ending the siege, was catapult the dead bodies of plague victims over the city walls.

The people of Caffa tried to get rid of the bodies quickly by throwing them into the sea but plague spread through the city. The Italian merchants left Caffa but by the time their ships reached Genoa and Venice, in January 1348, most of the merchants and sailors on board had died. The ships were chased away as soon as the Genoese realised that they carried the plague but this was again too late. They could not stop the disease from coming ashore and, as the ships sailed to other port cities, the plague spread to Marseilles in France, as well as Barcelona and Valencia in Spain.
Milan

When the plague reached Milan, the Archbishop ordered the first three houses hit by plague to be walled up and the people who lived inside left to die. This very harsh measure seems to have helped Milan be less affected by plague than other cities.

The disease spread along the trade routes of Europe (see the map, 'The spread of the Black Death to Europe' on page 328). The plague is said to have reached Norway via a ship carrying wool from England. Before the ship reached Norway, everyone on board had died. The ship drifted and ran aground near the city of Bergen. When locals went onto the 'ghost ship' to investigate, they caught and spread the deadly disease. By June 1348, it had reached the north of Germany and the trading ports in the south of England.

Source 2A

Oygarden, the deserted farm, was abandoned at the time of the Black Death, 1349 and lay abandoned until the 17th century. Today, it is part of the Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer, Norway.
Chronology, terms and concepts

1. How did modern scientists discover the bacteria that caused the Black Death?
2. Explain why you think the term 'Black Death' was used as a name for the plague.
3. Create a timeline of the spread of the plague from the 1320s to 1350.
4. Why did expelling the crews with plague from a port not stop the spread of plague?
5. How did people spread the plague while thinking they were avoiding it?
6. What does your answer to question 5 tell you about what Europeans knew about disease during this time?
7. Explain the ways in which some places seemed to avoid or lessen the impact of the plague.
8. 'The development of trade was responsible for the Black Death.' Do you agree with this statement? Give specific reasons and evidence for your answer.