



The Middle Ages: The Black Death

For Grades 6-8

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ARTICLE

Black Death

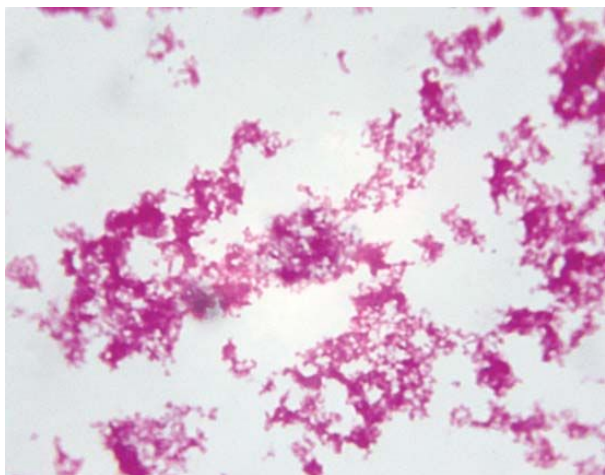
Between 1347 and 1351 a great outbreak of disease known as the Black Death ravaged Europe. This pandemic took a proportionately greater toll of life than any other known epidemic or war up to that time. The Black Death is widely believed to have been the result of plague that was caused by infection with the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Most scientists think that this bacterium was first passed from infected rodents to humans through the bite of fleas. Then it spread quickly from one person to another.



The Black Death killed about one-third of Europe's people between 1347 and 1351.

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The Disease



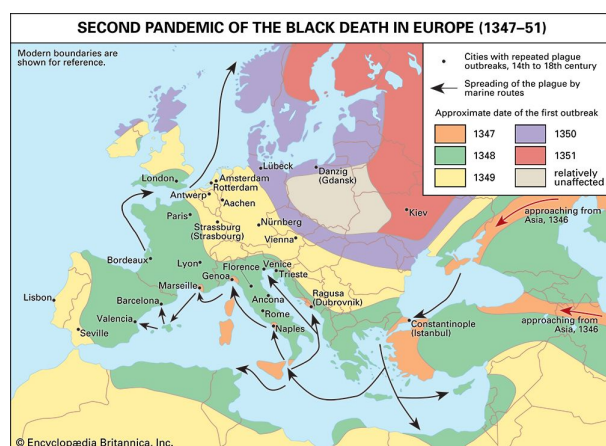
A microscopic image shows *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes plague.

© Photodisc/Thinkstock

Plague is an infectious fever that takes three forms in humans: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. The bubonic type is the mildest, accounting today for virtually no deaths and in the past killing about half of its victims. It is named for one of the disease's characteristics, the formation of buboes, or inflamed lymph glands. Pneumonic plague attacks the lungs and is often fatal in three or four days without treatment. In septicemic plague, bacteria overwhelm the bloodstream and often cause death within 24 hours, before other symptoms have a chance to develop. The pandemic was called the Black Death because of the black spots that appeared on the skin of many victims.

It is believed that the Black Death was a combination of bubonic and pneumonic plague. Bubonic plague does not pass directly from person to person. The bacteria are carried from rodent to person or from person to person by infected fleas. Pneumonic plague, however, is highly infectious. The bacteria can be passed from person to person in droplets from coughs or sneezes. The living conditions in medieval cities and towns encouraged the spread of the disease. Poor sanitation in cities such as London and Bristol, England, created breeding grounds for rats that carried the disease. In addition, overcrowded housing in the cities encouraged the spread of plague from person to person.

Reach of the Black Death



The reach of the Black Death in Europe from 1347 to 1351 can be seen as it spreads year by year.

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Plague is an ancient disease that has been verified as occurring as early as the 6th century AD. The epidemic of the 14th century originated in China and Central Asia. It was transmitted to Europe in 1347, when a Eurasian army besieged the Genoese trading post of Kaffa in the Crimean Peninsula. The army catapulted plague-infested corpses into the town in an effort to infect the enemy. From Kaffa, Genoese ships carried the disease westward to Mediterranean ports, and from there it spread inland. Plague reached Sicily in 1347; North Africa, mainland Italy, Spain, England, and France in 1348; Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Germany, and the Low Countries in 1349; and Scandinavia and the Baltic lands in 1350. There were recurrences of plague in 1361–63, 1369–71, 1374–75, 1390, and 1400.

Death rates from the Black Death varied from place to place. The rate of contagion was greater in the more populated towns than in the countryside. Even the great and powerful, who were more capable of flight, were struck down. Eleanor, queen of Peter IV of Aragon, and King Alfonso XI of Castile succumbed. Joan, daughter of the English king Edward III, died at Bordeaux on the way to her wedding with Alfonso's son. Canterbury lost two successive archbishops, John de Stratford and Thomas Bradwardine. The writer Petrarch lost not only Laura, who inspired so many of his poems, but also his patron, Giovanni Cardinal Colonna. The papal court at Avignon was reduced by one-fourth. Whole communities and families were annihilated.



The painting *Blessed Bernard Tolomei Interceding for the Cessation of the Plague in Siena* by the Italian artist Giuseppe Maria Crespi dates from about 1735. Bernard left his monastery to attend to victims of the Black Death in his birthplace of Siena. He died of plague in 1348. Bernard was canonized by Pope Benedict XVI in 2009.

J. Paul Getty Museum (object no. 86.PC.463); digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

The death rate was especially high in monastic communities. Plague spread rapidly through monasteries because monks lived in close contact with one another. Monasteries received many visitors ranging from royal delegations to poor pilgrims, offering many chances for disease to enter the community. Although monks took good care of the sick, they could only do so much to combat an illness as contagious as plague. The Black Death wiped out whole monasteries. Others, with only a few survivors, shut their doors. Historians have estimated that monasteries in England lost about half of their residents during the epidemic. Priests who cared for the sick and administered last rites to the dying were also very vulnerable. As the disease took the lives of clergy, there were not enough priests to tend to the dying. Pope Clement VI responded by granting remission (forgiveness) of sins to everyone who died of the Black Death. He also declared that the dying could make their final confessions to anyone and still achieve salvation. Before that, only clergy could perform last rites.



A town crier calls on the people to “bring out your dead” in a medieval street scene from the time of the Black Death. The victims were then hauled away for burial in mass graves.

Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine

The study of contemporary archives suggests that the death rates varied in the different regions between one-eighth and two-thirds of the population. The French chronicler Jean Froissart’s statement that about one-third of Europe’s population died in the epidemic may be fairly accurate. The population in England in 1400 was perhaps half what it had been 100 years earlier. In that country alone, the Black Death certainly caused the depopulation or total disappearance of about 1,000 villages. A rough estimate is that 25 million people in Europe died from plague during the Black Death. The overwhelming number of victims led to the development of a grim ritual in which the dead were collected each night and hauled off to mass graves known as “plague pits.”

Responses to the Black Death

The people of the time struggled to understand the catastrophe they faced. Medieval medicine was not advanced enough to determine the causes of the Black Death or to prevent it. In keeping with prevailing theories of the Middle Ages, doctors turned to astrology and superstition in their attempts to explain the disease. They could provide only ineffective treatments such as herbs and bloodletting.



Flagellants believed that the Black Death was a punishment from God. They marched throughout European towns, whipping each other to atone for their sins.

© Photos.com/Getty Images Plus

Some people considered the disease to be an expression of God's wrath. In an effort to appease God, people known as flagellants held processions throughout Europe in which they whipped themselves while praying for forgiveness. Other people devised conspiracy theories in which the Jews were poisoning wells to harm Christians. Such anti-Semitism led to deadly attacks on Jewish communities in Europe.

Effects of the Epidemic

The Black Death was an unprecedented epidemic that brought about many consequences. In the short term, wars stopped and trade slumped. A more lasting consequence was the drastic reduction of the labor force. The shortage of labor proved to be the ruin of many landowners. Hired laborers began to demand higher wages and better food. Peasant tenants, also fewer in number, asked for better conditions of tenure when they took up land. These changes began to blur the lines between the social classes. The English government's attempt to set maximum wages during the labor shortage led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Another lasting consequence of the Black Death was a decline in the status of the Roman Catholic Church. Disillusioned by the church's inability to stop the epidemic, people increasingly turned to heretical movements or mysticism to save their souls.

In some areas the psychological effects of the Black Death were reflected by a preoccupation with death and the afterlife, as displayed in poetry, sculpture, and painting. The most famous literary work to use the Black Death as a backdrop is Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. This collection of tales begins with the flight of a group of young people from plague-stricken Florence in 1348.

Citation (MLA style):

"Black Death." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Sep. 2021. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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ARTICLE

astrology

The study of heavenly bodies to learn what influence they may have on human life is called astrology. From the dawn of civilization, humans have looked with wonder and awe at the heavens, seeking to understand the nature of the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars. With the limited means available to them, ancient Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Greeks studied the regular movements they saw in the sky. The calculations they made laid the foundation for the science of astronomy. A pseudoscience, astrology also originated in speculations about how the heavens influenced life on Earth. In ancient times, and for many centuries afterward, no distinction was made between astrology and astronomy. Today, however, astrology is not viewed as a science. In fact, it is widely considered to be wholly inconsistent with the findings and theories of modern Western science.



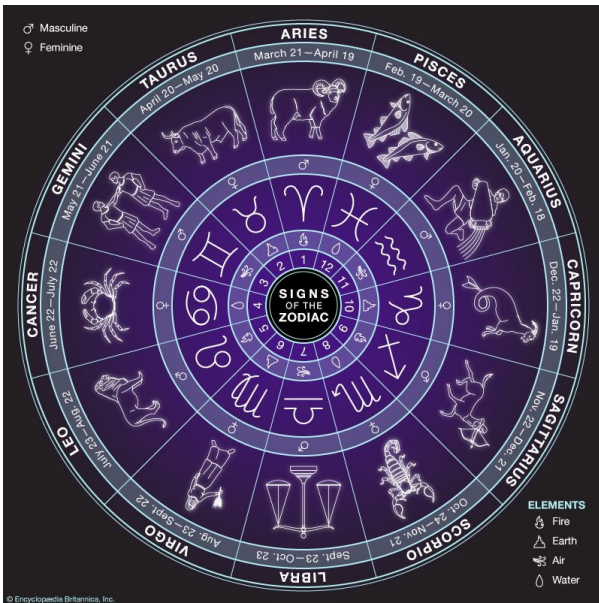
Midwives assist in a childbirth while astrologers in the background consult sky charts, in a woodcut from a book printed in 1554.

National Library of Medicine, Bethesda, Maryland

Although many people—especially astronomers and other scientists—believe astrology is nothing more than a kind of superstition, it has had a popular following, even in modern times. Many Wall Street brokers hired specialized astrologers in the 1980s. The most publicized acknowledgment of astrological influence occurred after an assassination attempt on United States President Ronald Reagan on March 30, 1981. For the next seven years his wife, Nancy, consulted a California astrologer about the most favorable times and dates for major events in the president's life—the takeoff and landing of Air Force One, State of the Union addresses, surgery, the signing of treaties, presidential debates, even press conferences.

Astrological advice and forecasts appear in many daily newspapers. Numerous magazines and books are published on the subject every year. Most of the advice that is given appears in a form called a horoscope—originally an elaborate chart drawn up to indicate what influences the heavenly bodies would have on the life of

an individual born at a particular time. The shorter capsules of advice that appear in print for a wider audience are more generalized horoscopes, drawn according to the 12 birth signs.



Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc./Patrick O'Neill Riley

An individual's astrological horoscope—that is, the natal, or birth, chart—is determined by the position of all the planets at the exact moment of birth. Astrologers divide the year into 12 equal sections, called the zodiac, which originally corresponded to 12 constellations lying in a great belt around the heavens. This scheme was based on the notion that the Sun passes through the 12 constellations of the zodiac during the course of a year. Each constellation was regarded as the house of a particular planet, though some planets ruled more than one constellation. Each planet was believed to have either a strong or a weak influence on a person's life, depending on its position in the heavens. Each of the 12 signs of the zodiac was also believed to have a relation to parts of the human body and to the four classical Greek elements—earth, air, fire, and water. Greek astrologers associated feminine or masculine traits with each birth sign.

Zodiac signs and their corresponding periods*	
Aries (the Ram)	March 21–April 19
Taurus (the Bull)	April 20–May 20
Gemini (the Twins)	May 21–June 21
Cancer (the Crab)	June 22–July 22
Leo (the Lion)	July 23–Aug. 22
Virgo (the Virgin)	Aug. 23–Sept. 22
Libra (the Scales)	Sept. 23–Oct. 23
Scorpius (the Scorpion)	Oct. 24–Nov. 21
Sagittarius (the Archer)	Nov. 22–Dec. 21
Capricornus (the Goat)	Dec. 22–Jan. 19
Aquarius (the Water Bearer)	Jan. 20–Feb. 18
Pisces (the Fishes)	Feb. 19–March 20
*The list gives the constellations of the zodiac, with the dates of the Sun's passage through them in the era when their boundaries were fixed. These dates are still used for the astrological signs.	

The divisions of the zodiac are called signs because ancient astrologers assigned descriptive names, mostly of animals, to various constellations and devised abstract symbols to fit these names. The position of the Sun in one of these 12 constellations at the moment of birth determines an individual's Sun sign. A person born just at the time of change from one Sun sign to the next is said to be on the cusp, sharing qualities of both signs. The word cusp originally meant "point," so the astrological cusp is the point of exit from, or entry to, a given sign.

In addition to the signs, all horoscopes are also divided into 12 houses. A house denotes some human characteristic or aspect of experience such as romance, home, family, travel, death, employment, health, and thought. All the houses are related to the signs, but the signs represent planetary influences, while the houses deal with earthly life.

The astrology practiced today is based on a system of beliefs derived from the early Greeks. A major error in their astrological sophistication was the assumption that all the planets and the Sun rotate around the Earth. It was not until the work of Copernicus and Galileo in the 16th and 17th centuries that the Sun was discovered to be the center of the solar system.

Early astrologers had different opinions on the relationship of planetary influences to the will of God. Some said that astrology foretells what will and must happen, without the possibility of events being changed either by humans or by God. (Christianity and Islam both take issue with astrologers because of this theory.) Less rigid astrologers claimed that astrology only predicts possible influences. One school of early Christian astrologers believed that astrology reveals what God has already planned.

In most cultures where astrology has long been practiced—among them Egyptian, Greek, Indian, and Chinese—the animistic religious systems claim all nature to be alive and to possess almost human qualities. In these traditions, astrology is simply another form of divination, of telling the future by consulting the will of natural forces.

"What's your sign?" was a cliché of the 1970s. For instant character analysis, distinct personality traits have been identified with each of the signs (gregarious Aquarius, nit-picking Virgo). Some people still like to check their daily horoscope for the general outlook of their sign. Others have their own personal horoscopes drawn up for more specific information that they believe might help them make wiser decisions.

With the help of computers, astrologers can make the complex mathematical computations for a horoscope in 5 or 10 minutes. Such computations used to take hours or even days. Many professional astrologers use computers in this way to save their time and energy for the art of interpreting the data.

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"Astrology." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Sep. 2021. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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ARTICLE

plague

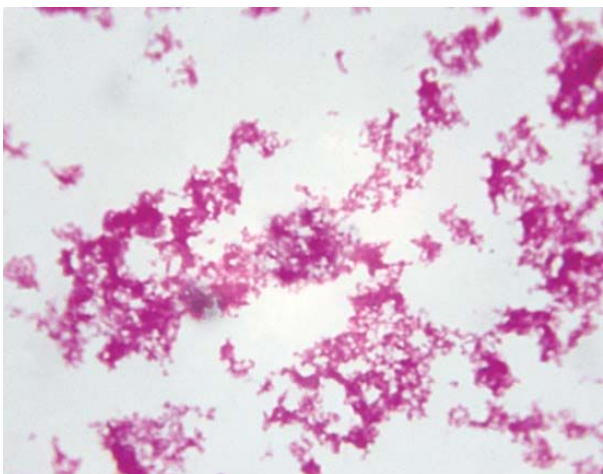
Plague is a disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. It occurs mainly in rodents, such as rats and squirrels, but it can be transmitted from rodents to humans by the bite of an infected flea. Plague was the cause of some of the most-devastating epidemics in history, including the Black Death of the 14th century.



Outbreaks of the plague throughout the Middle Ages affected nobles and peasants alike.

Yale University Art Gallery

Nature of the Disease



A microscopic image shows *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes plague.

© Photodisc/Thinkstock



A plague-infected Oriental rat flea (*Xenopsylla cheopis*). The flea transmits plague bacteria from infected rats to any person it bites.
Dr. Pratt—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Image Number: 2069)

In humans, plague has three forms: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. Bubonic plague is the best-known form, and it accounts for about three-fourths of plague cases. It is also the least dangerous form of plague, accounting today for virtually no deaths and in the past killing only half of its victims. Typically, bubonic plague starts two to six days after a person is infected with *Yersinia* bacteria. The most characteristic sign is the appearance of buboes—swollen, tender lymph nodes that are typically found in the groin and armpits. Other symptoms include high fever, chills, headache, weakness, and fatigue. Bubonic plague does not pass directly from person to person. The bacteria are carried from rodent to person or from person to person by infected fleas.

In pneumonic plague, the lungs are the site of infection. The symptoms are those of severe pneumonia—fever, weakness, and shortness of breath. Edema (filling with fluid) of the lungs soon follows, and death will almost certainly occur in three or four days if treatment is not provided. Other symptoms include insomnia, stupor, staggering gait, speech disorder, and loss of memory. Pneumonic plague is highly infectious, as the bacteria can be passed to other people in droplets from coughs or sneezes. The disease can also develop as a complication of bubonic plague.

In septicemic plague, the bloodstream is invaded by *Yersinia* bacteria. In untreated cases, an infected person can die even before the bubonic or pneumonic forms have had time to appear. Septicemic plague is marked by fatigue, fever, abdominal pain, shock, and internal bleeding. It can arise as a complication of bubonic plague or directly by infection from a flea bite.

Because of the severity of plague, treatment must begin immediately when infection is suspected. Plague is treated with antibiotics such as tetracycline and streptomycin. Modern therapy has reduced the global fatality rate of plague from its historical level of 50–90 percent to less than 15 percent. The fatality rate is even lower in cases of bubonic plague and in areas where modern health care is available.

History

Plague is an ancient disease. Evidence has shown that it was present in Asia and Europe by between 3000 and 800 BC. The first great plague pandemic to be reliably reported by historians occurred in the 6th century AD. The outbreak began in Egypt and moved along maritime trade routes. In 542 it struck Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), where it killed residents by the tens of thousands. Judging by descriptions of the symptoms and transmission of the disease, it is likely that all forms of plague were present. Over the next half-century the

pandemic spread westward to port cities of the Mediterranean and eastward into Persia. Historians believe the plague was spread by rats that were carried on trade ships and multiplied in the crowded, unsanitary cities of the time.



A town crier calls on the people to “bring out your dead” in a medieval street scene from the time of the Black Death. The victims were then hauled away for burial in mass graves.

Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine

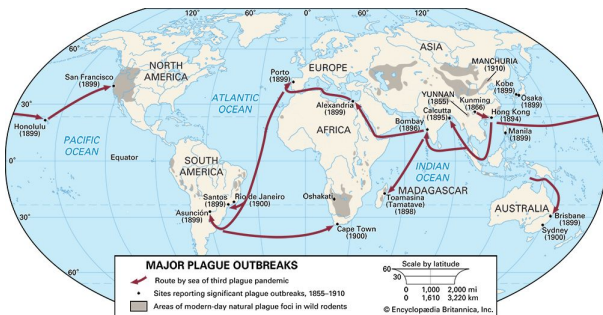
The next great plague pandemic was the dreaded Black Death of the 14th century. It originated in China or Central Asia. From there it was carried westward by Mongol armies and traders traveling the Silk Road. The disease reached the trading port of Kaffa, on the Crimean Peninsula, in 1347. From there it spread westward to Mediterranean ports and then inland, affecting most of Europe between 1347 and 1351. It was the most disastrous epidemic in European history, resulting in more than 25 million deaths—as much as one-third of the continent’s population. Europeans called the epidemic the Black Death because of the dark color of many victims’ faces after death. The epidemic also devastated the Muslim world of the Middle East and North Africa. It invaded the cities of Baghdad (now in Iraq), Damascus (Syria), Mecca (Saudi Arabia), Alexandria (Egypt), Tripoli (Libya), and Marrakech (Morocco). In this region, too, the Black Death is thought to have wiped out about one-third of the population.



A plague outbreak in London, England, killed more than 70,000 people between 1664 and 1666.

© Photos.com/Getty Images

Over the next few centuries, plague occurred frequently throughout Europe. A famous outbreak ravaged London, England, in 1664–66, causing up to 100,000 deaths in a population of about 460,000. Soon after that epidemic, however, plague outbreaks began to cease in much of Europe. Germany, for example, experienced its last epidemic in the 1680s. After an outbreak in Marseille, France, in 1720, plague seems to have disappeared from Europe. No single explanation has ever been given for the disappearance.



A map shows the locations of plague outbreaks in the 1800s and early 1900s.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

From the 18th century through the early 19th century, plague continued to exact a toll in Turkey, North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Greece. India saw several outbreaks in the 1810s and '20s. But the last great plague pandemic began in southwestern China in the 1850s. Plague reached Guangzhou (Canton) and Hong Kong in 1894, and

from these ports it spread throughout the world by means of rat-infested ships. The disease was carried to North America, South America, and South Africa—places where it had never been established before. The pandemic resulted in more than 10 million deaths, with India suffering the most.



Kitasato Shibasaburo, about 1928.

Wellcome Collection, London (Public Domain)

Breakthroughs in the scientific understanding of plague ensured that the third pandemic was the last. In 1894, during the outbreak in Hong Kong, the bacterium that causes plague was identified. Alexandre Yersin of France and Kitasato Shibasaburo of Japan discovered the bacterium independently of each other. A few years later scientists found that rat fleas carried the bacterium and transmitted it through their bites. These discoveries led to new rat-proofing measures on ships and the use of insecticides in areas where plague had broken out. The treatment of plague greatly improved when sulfa drugs and antibiotics became available beginning in the 1930s.

These measures led to huge declines in plague deaths. From a maximum of more than one million in 1907, deaths dropped to about 4,600 in 1949–53. Today some 1,000 to 3,000 people worldwide contract plague each year, and some 200 of them die. Most cases occur in Africa.

With the rise of global terrorism, plague has come to be seen as a potential weapon of biological warfare. In response, some governments have developed plans and stockpiled medications for dealing with emergency outbreaks of plague. (See *also* chemical and biological terrorism; chemical and biological warfare.)

Ann Giudici FettneDaphna GreggEd.

Citation (MLA style):

"Plague." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 30 May. 2019. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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ARTICLE

superstition

Fear of Friday the 13th; carrying a rabbit's foot for luck; refusing to walk under a ladder; avoiding cracks in a sidewalk—these are called superstitions. The word superstition is somewhat difficult to define. It can be called an irrational belief or practice. Unfortunately religion can be defined the same way. It has been said that one person's religion is another's superstition.



Thirteen is an unlucky number in the superstition of Western society.

Thinkstock Images/Jupiterimages

From the late Middle Ages through the 17th century, there was widespread belief in witchcraft in Europe and parts of North America. Today witchcraft is regarded as a superstition except by a very few people. Many who accept no religion denounce all religions as superstitious because they find no evidence to support them.

Elements of magic associated with religion and its beliefs have been regarded as superstitions. Amulets have been used to ward off evil spirits. Similar to the use of amulets is carrying a good-luck charm. The rabbit's foot has been considered a charm for centuries, probably because of the strength of the rabbit's hind legs.

Some superstitions are cultural or personal instead of religious. When a newly married couple enters their home for the first time, it has been traditional for the groom to carry the bride over the threshold. This custom is based

on the fear that, if the bride should stumble entering the home, it is a bad omen for the marriage. The custom of tying tin cans to the car of newlyweds probably originated in the notion that noisemakers would frighten away evil spirits. The same may be said of New Year's Eve noisemakers and fireworks.

Fear of the number 13 has long been a superstition. Its roots are religious. At the Last Supper of Jesus and his disciples, there were 13 persons, one of whom was Judas, the traitor. Today many tall buildings omit a numbered 13th floor, skipping instead from 12 to 14. Avoidance of black cats has religious origins as well. During the Middle Ages it was believed that witches could turn themselves into black cats. Thus when such a cat was seen, it was considered to be a witch in disguise.

Breaking a mirror is supposed to bring seven years of bad luck. Since a mirror reflects the self, distortion of the image was a sign of coming trouble. The Romans allotted seven years for the human body to renew itself after a mirror was broken.

Spilling salt has also been thought to bring bad luck. Salt was once a very valuable commodity, and wasting it was a real loss. It was the chief means of preserving and purifying food.

Salt has been used to pay workers' wages—the word salary originally meant "salt money." Should a believer of this superstition spill salt on a table, he will take a pinch of it and throw it over his left shoulder—into the face of the devil, who is supposedly poised there. (See *also* magic; religion.)

Citation (MLA style):

"Superstition." *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Aug. 2021. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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Oriental rat flea



A plague-infected Oriental rat flea (*Xenopsylla cheopis*). The flea transmits plague bacteria from infected rats to any person it bites.

Dr. Pratt—Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Image Number: 2069)

Citation (MLA style):

Oriental rat flea. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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 IMAGE

Black Death: map

The reach of the Black Death in Europe from 1347 to 1351 can be seen as it spreads year by year.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

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IMAGE

Black Death: street scene



A town crier calls on the people to “bring out your dead” in a medieval street scene from the time of the Black Death. The victims were then hauled away for burial in mass graves.

Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine

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Black Death: street scene. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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Petrarch

Britannica Note:

Laura, the inspiration for many of Petrarch's poems, died during the 1348 outbreak of the plague in Avignon, France.



Petrarch, engraving.

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Citation (MLA style):

Petrarch. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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Black Death: flagellants



Flagellants believed that the Black Death was a punishment from God. They marched throughout European towns, whipping each other to atone for their sins.

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Citation (MLA style):

Black Death: flagellants. Image. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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VIDEO

plague

Video Transcript

NARRATOR: In the mid-1300s a deadly disease killed about one-third of Europe's entire population. This pandemic, or outbreak, is known as the Black Death. At the time, many Europeans thought the Black Death was a punishment for their sins. Today, scientists think it was an outbreak of plague. Plague is caused by bacteria that infect rats. Fleas carry the infection from rats to humans.

An outbreak known as the Black Death killed one-third of Europe's people in the 1300s.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Citation (MLA style):

Plague. Video. *Britannica LaunchPacks: The Middle Ages: The Black Death*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 23 Mar. 2025. packs.eb.com. Accessed 4 May. 2025.

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