

Black Death/Bubonic Plague in Asia

By: Kallie Szczepanski

The [Black Death](#), a medieval pandemic that was likely the bubonic plague, is generally associated with Europe. This is not surprising, since it killed an estimated 1/3 of the European population in the 14th century. However, the plague started in Asia - and it devastated many areas of that continent, as well.

Unfortunately, the course of the pandemic in Asia is not as thoroughly documented as it is for Europe. However, the Black Death does appear in records from across Asia in the 1330s and 1340s. The disease spread terror and destruction wherever it arose.

Origins of the Black Death: Many scholars believe that the Black Death began in north-western China, while others cite south-western China or the steppes of Central Asia. We do know that in 1331, an outbreak erupted in the Yuan Empire; it may have hastened the end of Mongol rule over China. In 1334, this disease killed 5 million people in Hebei Province - about 90% of the population.

As of 1200, China had a total population of more than 120 million, but a 1393 census found only 65 million Chinese surviving. Some of that missing population was killed by famine and upheaval in the transition from Yuan to Ming rule, but many millions died of bubonic plague.

From its origin at the eastern end of the Silk Road, the Black Death rode trade routes west. At Central Asian caravan series and Middle Eastern trade centers, it infected people all across Asia.

What is Bubonic Plague? The bubonic plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which lives in the guts of fleas. The fleas are most commonly found on rodents - rats, marmots, prairie dogs, squirrels - but can also feed on humans.

When an infected flea bit a human, it would transmit the yersinia bacterium into the person's bloodstream. After 4-6 days, the victim would develop swollen lymph nodes and a black cyst at the site of the bite. Next, purple bruise-like lumps, called buboes, would form all over the victim's skin.

The disease also attacked the nervous system, causing delirium or stupor. Death would follow in a matter of days for 50-60% of sufferers.

The Black Death Spreads across Asia: Ibn al-Wardi, a Syrian writer who would later die of the plague himself in 1348, recorded that the Black Death came out of "The land of Darkness" (Central Asia). From there, it spread to China, India, the Caspian Sea and "land of the Uzbeks," and thence to Persia and the Mediterranean.

The Egyptian scholar Al-Mazriqi noted that "more than three hundred tribes all perished without apparent reason in their summer and winter encampments, in the course of pasturing their flocks and during their seasonal migration." He claimed that all of Asia was depopulated, as far as the Korean Peninsula. (Orent, 106)

The Black Death Strikes Persia: The Central Asian scourge struck Persia just a few years after it appeared in China - proof, if any is needed, that the Silk Road was a convenient route of transmission for the deadly bacterium.

In 1335, the Il-Khan (Mongol) ruler of Persia and the Middle East, Abu Said, died of bubonic plague during a war with his northern cousins, the Golden Horde. This signaled the beginning of the end for Mongol rule in the region.

An estimated 30% of Persia's people died of the plague in the mid-14th century. The region's population was slow to recover, in part due to the political disruptions caused by the fall of Mongol rule and the later invasions of Timur (Tamerlane).

Devastation at Issyk Kul: Archaeological excavations on the shores of Issyk Kul, a lake in what is now Kyrgyzstan, reveal that the Nestorian Christian trading community there was ravaged by bubonic plague in 1338-39. Issyk Kul was a major Silk Road depot, and has sometimes been cited as the origin point for the Black Death. It certainly is prime habitat for marmots, which are known to carry a virulent form of the plague.

It seems more likely, however, that traders from further east brought diseased fleas with them to the shores of Issyk Kul. Whatever the case, this tiny settlement's death rate shot up from a 150-year average of about 4 people per year, to more than 100 dead in 1338-39.

The Plague in Western Central Asia: Although specific numbers and anecdotes are hard to come by, different chronicles note that Central Asian cities like Talas, in modern-day Kyrgyzstan; Sarai, the capital of the Golden Horde in Russia; and Samarkand, now in Uzbekistan, all suffered outbreaks of the Black Death. It is likely that each population center would have lost at least 40% of its citizens, with some areas reaching death tolls as high as 70%.

The Mongols Spread Plague at Kaffa: In 1344, the Golden Horde decided to recapture the Crimean port city of Kaffa from the Genoese, Italian traders who had taken the town in the late 1200s. The Mongols under Jani Beg instituted a siege, which lasted until 1347, when reinforcements from further east brought the plague to the Mongol lines.

An Italian lawyer, Gabriele de Mussis, recorded what happened next: "The whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tartars [Mongols] and killed thousands upon thousands every day." He goes on to charge that the Mongol leader "ordered corpses to be placed in catapults and lobbed into the city in hopes that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside."

This incident is often cited as the first instance of biological warfare in history. However, other contemporary chroniclers make no mention of the putative Black Death catapults. A French churchman, Gilles li Muisis, notes that a "calamitous disease befell the Tartar army, and the mortality was so great and widespread that scarcely one in twenty of them remained alive." However, he depicts the Mongol survivors as surprised when the Christians in Kaffa also came down with the disease.

Regardless of how it played out in fact, the Golden Horde's siege of Kaffa certainly did drive refugees to flee on ships, bound for Genoa. These refugees likely were a primary source of the Black Death that went on to decimate Europe.

The Plague Reaches the Middle East: European observers were fascinated but not too worried when the Black Death struck the western rim of Central Asia and the Middle East. One recorded that "India was depopulated; Tartary, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia were covered with dead bodies; the Kurds fled in vain to the mountains." However, they would soon become participants rather than observers in the world's worst pandemic.

In "The Travels of Ibn Battuta," the great traveler noted that as of 1345, "the number that died daily in Damascus [Syria] had been two thousand," but the people were able to defeat the plague through prayer. In 1349, the holy city of Mecca was hit by the plague, likely brought in by infected pilgrims on the hajj.

The Moroccan historian Ibn Khaldun, whose parents died of the plague, wrote about the outbreak this way: "Civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out... Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed."

More Recent Asian Plague Outbreaks: In 1855, the so-called "Third Pandemic" of bubonic plague broke out in Yunnan Province, China. Another outbreak, or a continuation of the Third Pandemic (depending upon which source you believe) sprang up in China in 1910. It went on to kill more than 10 million, many of them in Manchuria.

A similar outbreak in British India left about 300,000 dead in 1896-98. This outbreak began in Bombay (Mumbai) and Pune, on the country's west coast. By 1921, it would claim some 15 million lives.

With dense human populations and natural plague reservoirs (rats and marmots), Asia is always at risk of another round of bubonic plague. Fortunately, timely use of antibiotics can cure the disease today.

Legacy of the Plague in Asia: Perhaps the most significant impact that the Black Death had on Asia was that it contributed to the fall of the mighty Mongol Empire. After all, the pandemic started within the Mongol Empire, and devastated peoples from all four of the khanates.

The massive population loss and terror caused by the plague destabilized Mongolian governments from the Golden Horde in Russia to the Yuan Dynasty in China. The Mongol ruler of the Ilkhanate Empire in the Middle East died of the disease, along with six of his sons.

Although the Pax Mongolica had allowed increased wealth and cultural exchange, through a reopening of the Silk Road, it also allowed this deadly contagion to spread rapidly westward from its origin in western China or eastern Central Asia. As a result, the world's second-largest empire ever crumbled and fell.

Black Death/Bubonic Plague in Asia

Reading Questions

1. What is the Black Death or Bubonic Plague?
2. What impact did the Black Death have on European populations?
3. Where did the Black Death originate? How many people are estimated to have died from the plague in China?
4. 4. What are some of the long lasting effects of the spread of the plague in Asia (Legacy of the Plague?)
5. Look at the two maps included with the article. How do you deduce the Black Death was spread?

