

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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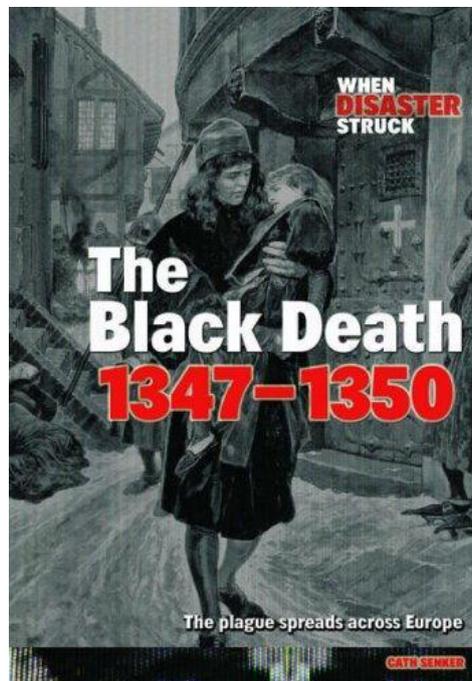
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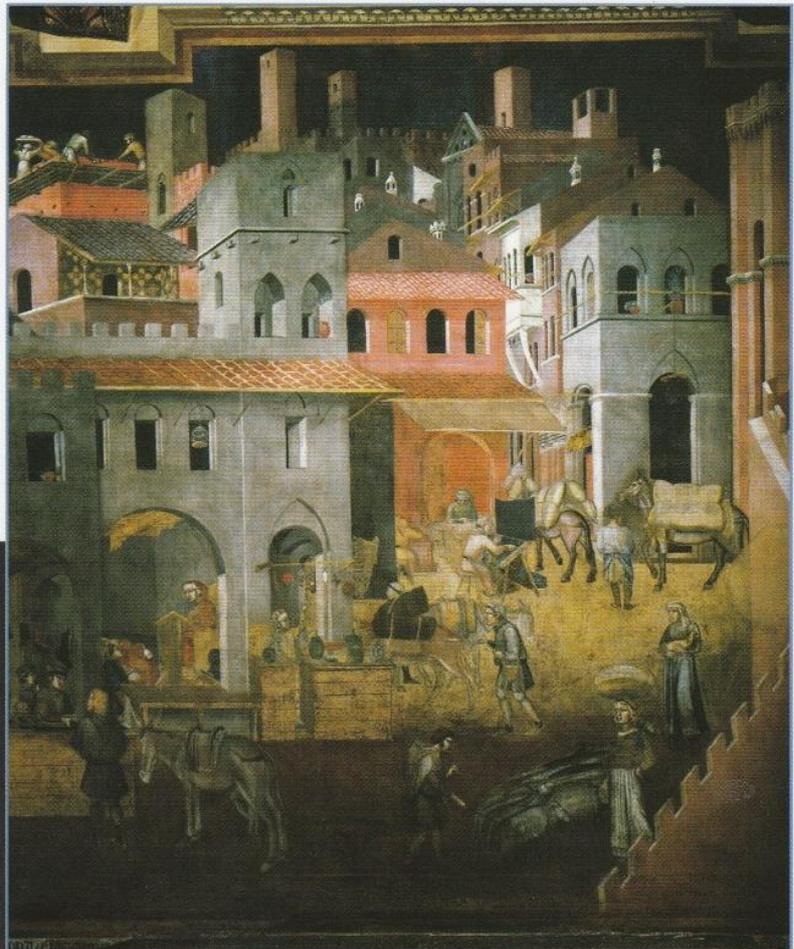
Senker, C. (2006). *The Black Death 1347-1350 : the plague across Europe..* Oxford : Raintree.



RATS, FLEAS, AND DISEASE

How did the Black Death spread? The answer lies with the tiny rat flea. Rat fleas carried the plague **bacillus** – a type of bacteria. The fleas jumped on to rats and other rodents and infected them with the plague. When their **host** died, they leapt on to another rat. Once the local rats had died, the fleas fed on human beings. They spread the plague to their human hosts.

Medieval European cities were very dirty. Butchers killed animals on the street and left the blood there. Piles of unwanted **offal** littered the ground. People emptied their **chamber pots** out of their windows. Human **excrement** and urine covered the streets.



In this Italian painting from the 1300s, animals can be seen carrying goods to market. Few people in medieval times cleared up the animal dung, so the streets were dirty.



These are black rats. Black rats carried the plague. Medieval people were used to seeing rats everywhere. They did not realize that rats spread the disease.

The dirty cities were the perfect place for rats. There was a good food supply. The rats fed on people's stored grains and food scraps. Also, rats could move freely. Most people lived in narrow rows of houses crammed together. The lanes between the rows were so narrow that rats could easily run between homes. Infected rats quickly spread the plague.

The plague spread fast in the countryside, too. The walls in country homes were so thin that rats could gnaw through from house to house.

Medieval people did not keep their homes or themselves clean. Many shared their homes with their pigs, horses, chickens, and goats. They did not believe in washing. In fact they thought bathing was bad for a person's health. They seldom undressed or changed their clothes. People's dirty bodies were crawling with fleas. Fleas were able to jump quickly from person to person, spreading the plague.

RAT BABIES!

Rats are very good at spreading disease. They breed fast and are very mobile. It is calculated that if two black rats bred for three years (and none of the babies died) they and their offspring could produce 329 million babies in that time. Rats can climb walls, squeeze through tiny gaps, and survive a fall from 15 metres (49 feet). They can gnaw through most surfaces – even lead pipes.