

10.6 The spread of the Black Death

From around 1330 to 1351, the Black Death swept through Asia, Europe, north Africa and the Middle East, killing an estimated 100 million people.

Origins of the Black Death

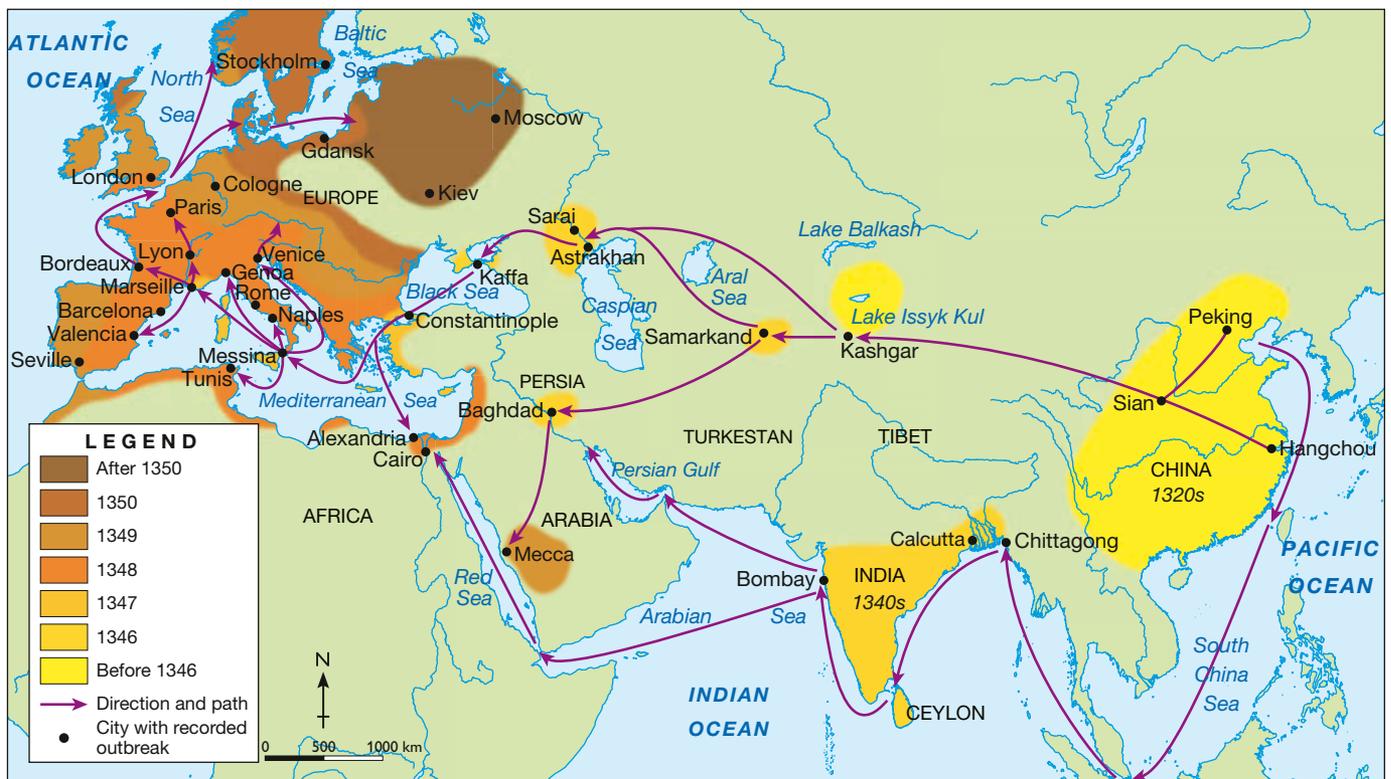
Most scientists and historians believe that an especially lethal strain of the plague broke out in China in the early 1330s, following a devastating famine. This area was then known as the Yuan Empire (covering most of present-day China and Mongolia), which had been under Mongol rule since 1279. Some think that the disease was first carried westwards by Mongols travelling along the Silk Road.

In 1346, the pandemic eventually reached a trading city on the Black Sea called Kaffa that was controlled by Genoan (Italian) merchants (see

Source 1). At that time, Muslim Turks (called **Tatars**) were attacking Kaffa. The attacking forces of Tartars were infected with the plague. A 14th-century Italian writer, Gabriele de' Mussi, described how the Tatars 'ordered dead corpses [of their men] to be placed in **catapults** and lobbed [thrown] into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. What seemed like mountains of dead were thrown'. The Tatar attack began to break down as the disease spread rapidly among their troops, killing all but a few. The Genoan merchants in Kaffa took the opportunity to flee to their boats.

The Genoans, however, were now also carrying the disease. On the way home, they infected those they came in contact with, including merchants in Constantinople (who, in turn, carried the plague further east). When the ships reached their home port back in Italy, crowds flocked to greet them. These survivors unknowingly introduced the disease to their homeland via their own infection and the rats on board (who jumped to land).

ORIGINS AND SPREAD OF THE BLACK DEATH



Source 1

Source: Oxford University Press



Source 2 The tower of a 14th–19th-century Genoese fortress in Kaffa (modern-day Feodosiya in Ukraine)

The rapid spread of the Black Death

The spread across Europe

Once the Black Death had moved westwards from Asia, it raced through Europe (see Source 1). By the end of 1347, most Mediterranean islands were infected. Many Mediterranean seaports were also infected. By 1348, the Black Death was in Marseilles and, then, other cities in the south of France. From there, it moved into Spain and further into Italy.

Later in 1348 the plague was carried across to England by sea. In 1349, the plague spread across the rest of the British Isles and then across the North Sea into Norway. It also continued its spread across mainland Europe, reaching Germany. By 1350 the plague had further spread into eastern Europe, Russia and the rest of Scandinavia. By 1352 the plague was widespread across Europe.

The spread into Egypt and north Africa

Europe was not the only area devastated by the Black Death. By 1347, it reached Alexandria in north Africa, carried by infected travellers on ships. An Arab writer described the arrival there of a slave ship that had set out to sea from Constantinople with over 330 people on board. By the time it arrived in Alexandria, there were only three survivors.

By early 1348, up to 1000 people were dying per day in Alexandria. In fact, Alexandria's population did not return to what it was before the plague until hundreds of years later.

In other villages of the Nile delta, the death rate was so high that towns were abandoned, fishing almost stopped and law courts were closed. In the town of Bilbeis, for example, bodies were reported to be piled up in mosques and shops. Roads were littered with rotting corpses, which were eaten by dogs and rats.

The southward spread of the plague from Alexandria saw it travel up the Nile Valley (again, mostly through infected boat passengers). About 200000 people died in Cairo alone – 37 per cent of the city's population. By February 1349, the Black Death had reached Aswan, 1000 kilometres south of Cairo.

To the west of Egypt, the plague's advance followed the north African coastline. It reached Tunis in April 1348 – most likely through trading links with Sicily. From there it pushed into today's Algeria and Morocco. Interestingly, **nomadic** Arabs (who lived in tents, moving from place to place) were not struck down by the plague.

The spread into the Middle East

The Black Death spread to Yemen in the east by 1351. The king of Yemen, and his attendants and **courtiers**, carried the disease to their home country after their release from a Cairo prison.

Three years earlier, in April 1348, the plague had already reached Gaza. From there it spread to Palestine and Syria. Less than a year later, it had killed 50000 people in Damascus – roughly half the population. Eventually, the whole of the Islamic world was affected, especially those living in towns or cities.

Check your learning 10.6

Remember and understand

- 1 Where was the initial outbreak of the Black Death believed to have occurred?
- 2 Describe the impact of the Black Death on Egypt during 1348 and 1349.

Apply and analyse

- 3 Write a paragraph outlining the role that trade and trade routes played in the rapid spread of the Black Death.
- 4 Why do you think it is that nomadic Arabs were able to escape the Black Death?

Evaluate and create

- 5 Create a timeline that lists key events in the spread of the pandemic from east to west. Include key dates for Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Europe.