

# SOCIAL UPHEAVAL

## THE BLACK DEATH

In the middle of the fourteenth century, western Europe experienced a disaster so great that many people thought the end of the world had come. Italian trading ships returning from ports on the Black Sea brought back one of the most devastating disease epidemics in history: the Black Death.

The Black Death was a variety of **bubonic plague**. It spread from victim to victim through the fleas on rats, which lived on medieval ships and throughout towns and cities. The diseased person quickly developed buboes (swollen **lymph glands**) and was covered with dark blotches on the skin. Then the patient would be stricken with a high fever and begin vomiting blood and **hallucinating**. Most victims died within one to three days. In some villages and towns, the sick and dying outnumbered the healthy.

Medieval medicine had no cure for the disease. Doctors recommended burning sulphur and smelling garlic as ways of preventing the spread of the plague. Neither was helpful. Probably twenty-five million people — about one-third of all the people of Europe — died from the plague. Thousands of villages became ghost towns, not reappearing until centuries later when their outlines were revealed through **aerial photographs** taken during the Second World War.

The Black Death brought out the best and worst in people. Many priests, nuns, and doctors died because they spent so much time tending the sick. At the other extreme, some parents abandoned their sick children, and thieves robbed corpses or broke into houses where everyone had died. Groups of religious fanatics called "Flagellants" travelled from town to town spreading the idea that the plague was a punishment from God.

**bubonic plague:** a highly contagious, usually fatal disease; swollen lymph glands were a typical symptom

**lymph glands:** rounded masses of tissue located under the arms and in the groin

**hallucinating:** seeing things that do not exist

**aerial photograph:** a picture of the ground, taken from a great height



**Figure 5-19** Victims of the plague were desperate for a cure. Here a doctor attempts to drain a bubo. This treatment would only have helped spread the disease. Why would that be so?

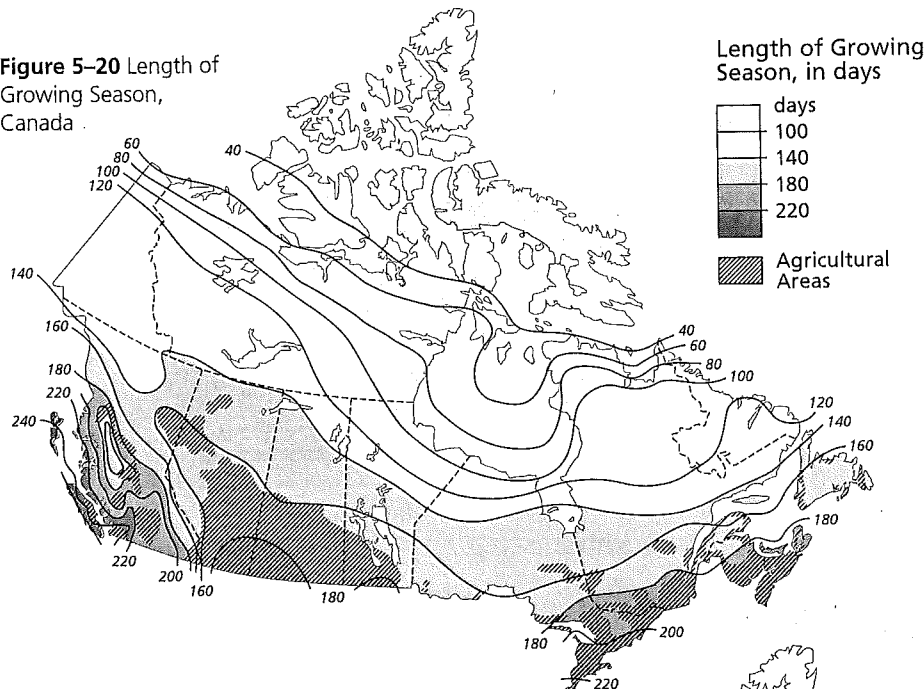
# Compare Maps

Early map makers usually attempted to locate towns, rivers, bodies of water, and natural features. Many medieval maps were very fanciful, as we saw with the T-O map on page 60. Nonetheless people wanted maps mainly to

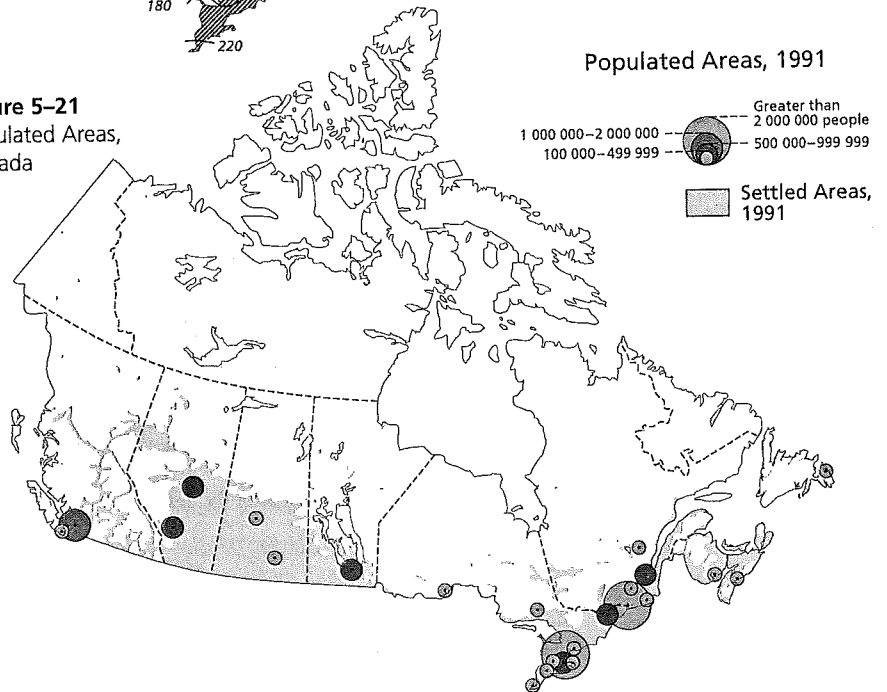
show them the rest of the world in relation to themselves. Today we make maps to show us much more, from the routes taken by explorers to the locations of prime fisheries areas. We use maps to help us understand all sorts of information.

By comparing maps of different types but of the same area, we gain even further insight by spotting relationships and patterns. For example, let's look at the following two maps of Canada.

**Figure 5-20** Length of Growing Season, Canada



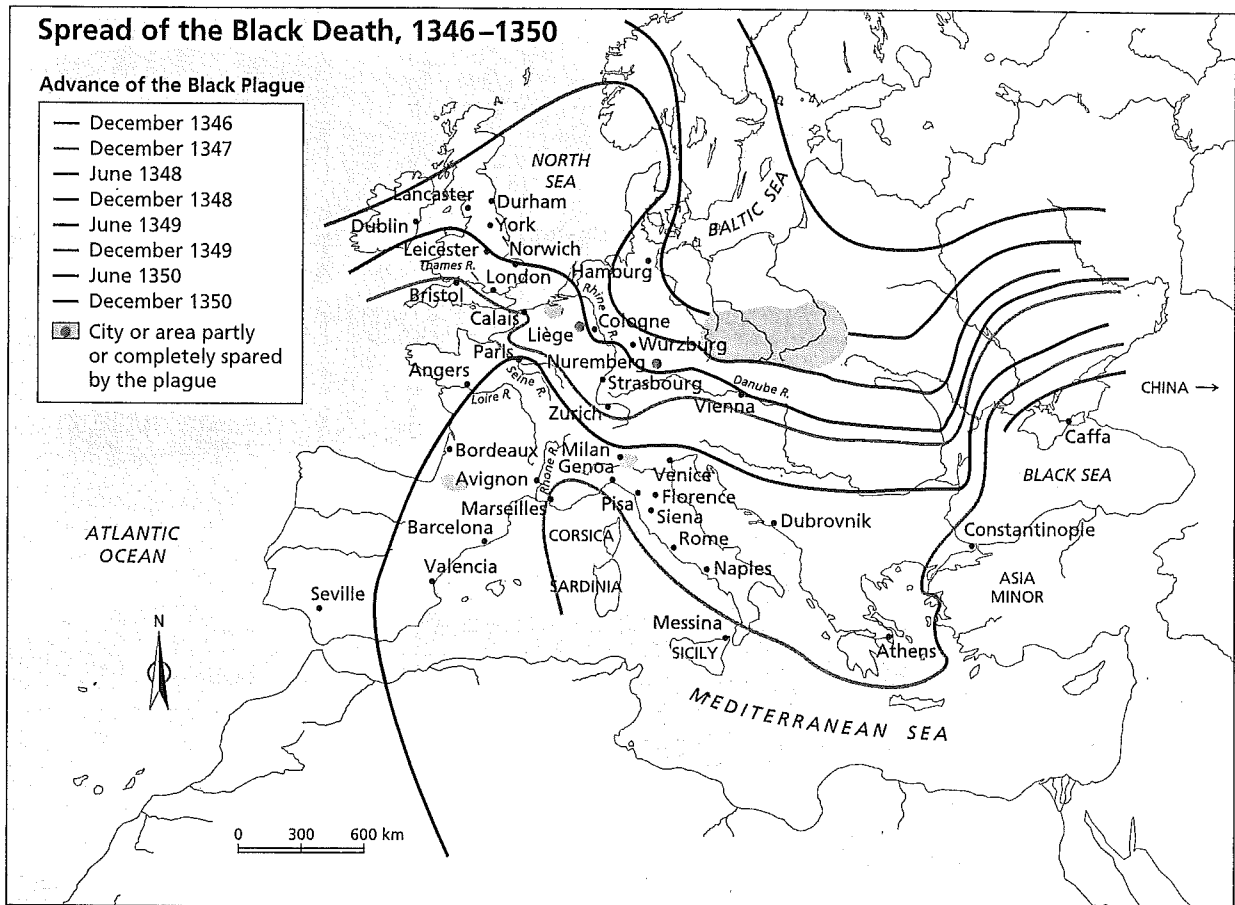
**Figure 5-21** Populated Areas, Canada



Try to find connections between the two maps on page 162. How would you describe where people live in relation to the agricultural areas? Do many live

where the growing season is shorter than 100 days? How about where the growing season is more than 180 days? Do you see a major exception in western Canada? Use

your knowledge of Canada's natural features or refer to a relief map of Canada to explain this exception to the pattern.



**Figure 5-22** Historians think the plague started in China and travelled west along the caravan routes. By 1346 the plague had reached the Black Sea. Here the Italian trading colony of Caffa was besieged by a Mongol army. The Mongol general catapulted the bodies of his dead, plague-stricken soldiers into the city.

## NOW YOU DO IT

1. Compare the map above to the map in Figure 5-11, which identifies the main European trade routes in the late Middle Ages. Does your comparison support the historians'

hypothesis that the plague spread along the trade routes? How? Describe one route that the plague might have followed in its march across Europe.

## Boccaccio's Decameron

Images of the plague haunted artists of the late Middle Ages. The Dance of Death—a popular theme in paintings—shows grinning skeletons leading people from the different classes of society to their graves. The figure of Death became a common character in stories.

The Italian poet Giovanni Boccaccio used the Black Death as background for his collection of stories called *Decameron*, written in 1353. In *Decameron*, ten young people flee the plague-stricken city of Florence to stay in a country estate until the epidemic has ended. To pass the time, they hold a contest to see who can tell the best story. In the opening chapter of his book, Boccaccio tells about the ravages of the Black Death in Florence. Even though this passage comes from a work of fiction, historians consider it primary source material because it was written by an eyewitness to the plague. Explain why those with little money presented a “more pathetic spectacle.”



As for the common people and a large proportion of the bourgeoisie [the middle class], they presented a much more pathetic spectacle, for the majority of them were constrained [forced], either by their poverty or the hope of survival, to remain in their houses. Being confined to their own parts of the city, they fell ill daily in their thousands, and since they had no one to assist them or attend to their needs, they inevitably perished almost without exception. Many dropped dead in the open streets, both by day and by night, whilst a great many others, though dying in their own houses, drew their neighbours' attention to the fact more by the smell of their rotting corpses than by any other means. And what with these, and the others who were dying all over the city, bodies were here, there, and everywhere.



### DID YOU KNOW?

*A more recent epidemic of bubonic plague began in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894. Within twenty years, it had killed 10 000 000 people around the world.*

### Effects of the Black Death on Economics

The Black Death changed Europe forever, not only by killing so many people but also by damaging the feudal system. Feudalism, as we saw in Chapter 2, was based on farming. The growth of towns and trade had

already weakened this system. After the Black Death, labour was in such short supply that workers could travel from estate to estate and ask for higher wages. Because of the labour shortage this brought about and the rise in wages, the Black Death caused many feudal estates to go bankrupt.

## Balance Sheet of a Manor

These budgets from a fourteenth-century manor show how the Black Death made the manor lose money. By reducing the labour force, the plague forced lords to pay more to get the labour

they needed to run their manors. Furthermore, after the plague the manor had to operate with sixty fewer serfs. What effect would this have on the manor farm and the people left?

### DID YOU KNOW?

*During the plague years, many people died of starvation because the plague had killed so many farm workers.*

### BEFORE THE BLACK DEATH:

Two hundred serfs live and work on the manor.

#### Income

200 serfs x 124 days/serf, valued at 1 penny/day:

$200 \times 124 \times 1 = 24\,800$  pennies worth of work

**Total income for one year: 24 800 pennies worth of work**

#### Expenses

To hire 80 additional workers for 300 days/year at 1 penny/day:

$80 \times 300 \times 1 = 24\,000$  pennies

**Total expenses for one year: 24 000 pennies**

**Profit from labour for one year before the Black Death:**

$24\,800 - 24\,000 = 800$  pennies

### AFTER THE BLACK DEATH:

Sixty serfs are dead, or have run away to work for higher wages elsewhere. Cost of outside workers is now 3 pennies per day since wages have gone up.

#### Income

140 serfs x 124 days/serf, valued at 1 penny/day:

$140 \times 124 \times 1 = 17\,360$  pennies worth of work

Plus

**Total income for one year: 17 360 pennies worth of work**

#### Expenses

To hire 80 additional workers for 300 days a year at 3 pennies/day:

$80 \times 300 \times 3 = 72\,000$  pennies

**Total expenses for one year: 72 000 pennies**

**Loss from labour for one year after the Black Death:**

$17\,360 - 72\,000 = -54\,640$  pennies



## Persecution of the Jews

The plague brought out the good in people but also the bad. Some of the worst instances of cruelty during the plague involved prejudice against the Jewish people. This was not unusual.

Jews lived all over Europe in the Middle Ages, particularly in larger villages and towns.

The most skilful and knowledgeable doctors of the Middle Ages were Jewish, though usually they were not allowed to treat Christians. Only a few occupations were open to Jews, so some concentrated on academic studies. Others flourished in business, becoming prosperous jewellers, money traders, and merchants.

Jews were not appreciated for their successes, however. They were usually forced to live in a *ghetto* (a certain section of the town or city), had to wear identifying yellow patches on their clothing, and did not have the freedoms of other

On Saturday — that was St. Valentine's Day — they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt.



citizens. Many Christians blamed Jews for the crucifixion of Christ and accused them of secret anti-Christian rituals. At times of trouble, Christians tended to blame Jews for their problems, making them **scapegoats**. Many Jews were massacred during the Crusades and at other times of unrest.

During a time of plague in the French city of Strasbourg, the

townspeople accused the Jews of starting the epidemic by putting poison in the city's wells. Despite the objections of city officials, the mob dragged the entire Jewish community to the Jewish cemetery, where they burned them to death in a bonfire. Does this event remind you of a tragedy that occurred during World War Two? Describe links between the two events.

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## THE PEASANTS' REVOLTS

Feudalism was further weakened in the fourteenth century when the lowest order of society, the peasants, rose up and demanded better living conditions. In both France and England the revolts at first met with some success but were then savagely suppressed by the nobility.

### France

In France, the revolt was called the "Jacquerie," after Jacques Bonhomme, the nickname for the French peasant. The revolt began after the French defeat at the battle of Poitiers in 1356, when the English captured the French king, John II, and held him in London

for ransom. While he was gone, a mob attacked the palace of the king's son, the dauphin, in Paris, and drove him from the capital.

In the northern countryside, the serfs broke into open revolt against their lords. Even though the farmlands had been laid waste by years of fighting, manor lords were still demanding high rents from their serfs. Banding together, peasant armies burned manor houses throughout northern France and killed their lords. Reaction was swift and brutal. Ringleaders were rounded up and hanged, and whole villages were burned to the ground.

### England

In fourteenth-century England, the ravages of the Black Death caused

**scapegoat:** a person wrongfully blamed, sometimes leading to persecution