



Close Read



Connect Cause and Effect

A First-Hand Description of the Plague and Its Spread

Directions: Read through the passage below and answer the questions in the right hand column.

Michael Platiensis lived in Messina, the first port city in Europe to feel the effects of the plague. The following document is his description of the arrival and progress of the disease in 1347 though the account was written in 1357.

At the beginning of October, in the year of the incarnation of the Son of God 1347, twelve Genoese galleys [trading ships] . . . entered the harbor of Messina. In their bones they bore so virulent a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade death. The infection spread to everyone who had any contact with the diseased. Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies and, so to say, undermined. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil which the people called "burn boil". This infected the whole body, and

penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.

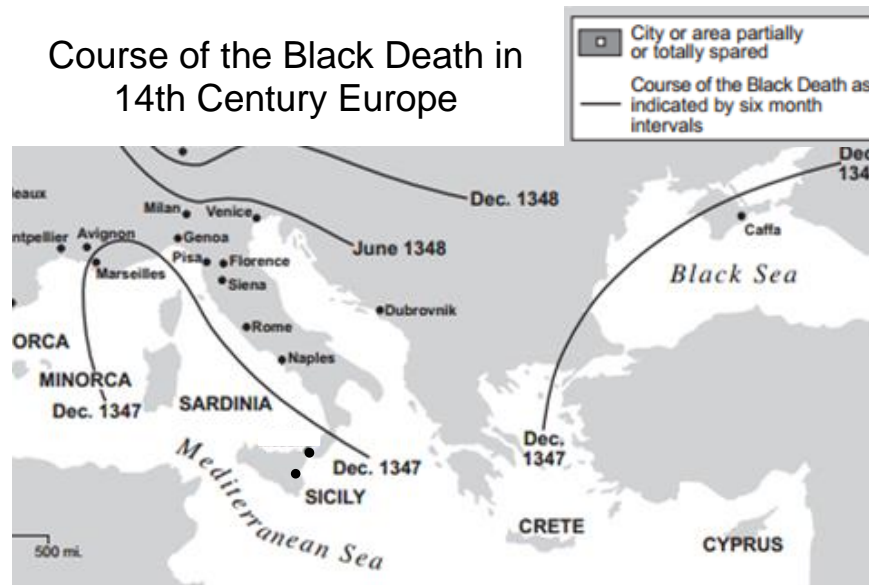
Not only all those who had speech with them died, but also those who had touched

1. Who wrote this text? when was it written?

2. Is this a primary or secondary source? How do you know?

3. According to the author, what brought the plague to Messina?

Course of the Black Death in 14th Century Europe



or used any of their things. When the inhabitants of Messina discovered that this sudden death emanated from the Genoese ships they hurriedly ordered them out of the harbor and town. But the evil remained and caused a fearful outbreak of death. Soon men hated each other so much that if a son was attacked by the disease his father would not tend him. If, in spite of all, he dared to approach him, he was immediately infected and was bound to die within three days. Nor was this all; all those dwelling in the same house with him, even the cats and other domestic animals, followed him in death. As the number of deaths increased in Messina many desired to confess their sins to the priests and to draw up their last will and testament. But ecclesiastics [clergy who work for the Catholic Church], lawyers and notaries refused to enter the houses of the diseased.

Soon the corpses were lying forsaken in the houses. No ecclesiastic, no son, no father and no relation dared to enter, but they hired servants with high wages to bury the dead. The houses of the deceased remained open with all their valuables, gold and jewels. . . . When the catastrophe had reached its climax the Messinians resolved to emigrate. One portion of them settled in the vineyards and fields, but a larger portion sought refuge in the town of Catania. The disease clung to the fugitives and accompanied them everywhere where they turned in search of help. Many of the fleeing fell down by the roadside and dragged themselves into the fields and bushes to expire. Those who reached Catania breathed their last in the hospitals there. The terrified citizens would not permit the burying of fugitives from Messina within the town, and so they were all thrown into deep trenches outside the walls.

Thus the people of Messina dispersed over the whole island of Sicily and with them the disease, so that innumerable people died. The town of Catania lost all its inhabitants, and ultimately sank into complete oblivion. Here not only the "burn blisters" appeared, but there developed gland boils on the groin, the thighs, the arms, or on the neck. At first these were of the size of a hazel nut, and developed accompanied by violent shivering fits, which soon rendered those attacked so weak that they could not stand up, but were forced to lie in their beds consumed by violent fever. Soon the boils grew to the size

4. What symptoms did the author observe in victims of the plague?

5. According to the author, what brought the plague to Catania?

6. What methods did people use to stop the spread of the plague?

of a walnut, then to that of a hen's egg or a goose's egg, and they were exceedingly painful, and irritated the body, causing the sufferer to vomit blood. The sickness lasted three days, and on the fourth, at the latest, the patient succumbed [gave in; died]. As soon as anyone in Catania was seized with a headache and shivering, he knew that he was bound to pass away within the specified time. . . . When the plague had attained its height in Catania, the patriarch endowed all ecclesiastics, even the youngest, with all priestly powers for the absolution [forgiveness] of sin which he himself possessed as bishop and patriarch. But the pestilence [disease] raged from October 1347 to April 1348. The patriarch himself was one of the last to be carried off. He died fulfilling his duty. At the same time, Duke Giovanni, who had carefully avoided every infected house and every patient, died.

7. Historian and author, Leonard W. Courie wrote that “Faith in religion decreased after the plague.” What evidence from this account might support Courie’s claim?

This account is from Michael Platiensis (1357), quoted in Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death*, trans. C.H. Clarke (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926), pp. 18-20. <http://web.archive.org/web/20091001151555/http://www.boisestate.edu/courses/westciv/plague/07.shtml>

8. Explain the extent to which Michael Platiensis’s account is a reliable source of evidence about *the spread of the Black Death.*

Questions to consider when describing a source’s reliability.	Your responses to task #8
Does the source include evidence about the given topic?	
Is the source primary or secondary?	
Is the author biased?	
What are the limitations of the source to give evidence about the topic?	

9. Identify and explain a cause and effect relationship between what is depicted in the map entitled “Course of the Black Death in 14th Century Europe” and Michael Platiensis’s account.