



## Part One: A Brief Discription By Lady Squire Megana Viate

The “Black Death”, better known to our medieval counterparts as the “Grate pestilence” of 1347, is considered to be one of the major events in world history, and is still the subject of medical, historical, and sociological analysis. The evidence of the plague is found in the broad swath it cut across North Africa, Asia, and Europe, its terrifying symptoms, and its impact on society. The only big question about the Black Death is whether bubonic plague exclusively caused the disaster of the 1340s or if another disease was simultaneously ravaging some parts of Europe, particularly England.

Ancient history includes vivid descriptions of epidemics that seized their victims suddenly and produced an agonizing death. The growth of international trade and military invasions later provided the opportunity for diseases to spread rapidly from one population to another. Smallpox and measles came first, both causing high mortality within populations that had not previously been exposed. The plague arrived in force in the sixth century C.E., causing an even greater death toll from previous epidemics and became known as "Justinian's Plague".

*Yersinia pestis* or bubonic plague is the most common blame for the sixth century outbreak. However, genetic studies of the bubonic plague germ, carried out of samples taken from skeletal remains in London by researchers from the University of Tubingen, suggest that this outbreak (and others from antiquity) arose from now-extinct strains of *Yersinia pestis*, which was genetically distinct from the fourteenth century pandemic or entirely unrelated to bubonic plague. The plagues’ social and cultural impact during this period is comparable to that of the Black Death. In views of the sixth century “Western” historians, it was nearly worldwide in scope ravaging central and southern Asia, North Africa, Arabia and Europe from Denmark in the north to Ireland in the west. The powerful and still expanding Byzantine Empire, centered in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), was so devastated that its political and military power sharply declined. Genetic studies point to China being the primary source of the contagion.

The plague did not entirely disappear but entered a long phase of withdrawal with occasional local outbreaks, especially in central Asia. When it did return, it was with a furious rush that created widespread panic in populations already beset with both natural and man-made disasters. The fourteenth century suffered an entire catalog of catastrophes, including earthquakes, fires, floods, freezing weather, and crop failures. In spite of, or maybe because of, these natural disasters, warfare and banditry was incessant.

Social order was weakened under the stress and a hungry, exhausted population became more vulnerable to opportunistic diseases.

It was within this already precarious situation that the plague once again crossed into Europe. There had been rumors about a deadly epidemic sweeping through China in 1333 and in the Middle East starting in 1338. From China it passed through India, Persia and Russia by means of trade routes. The first



named European victims of the plague died in 1338. In an area around Lake Issyk Kul (Baikal) in Russia, there is a grave maker, which reads, "This is the grave of Ktluk. He died of the plague with his wife, Magnu-Kelka." The plague took hold among the Tartars of Asia Minor. In this instance, the Christian minority was blamed. Later as the plague devastated Europe, Jews were not only blamed but also tortured and

burned alive. The Genoese merchants fled the Tartars to their fortified town of Kaffa (now Feodosiya, Ukraine) on the Crimean coast. The besieging army was soon ravaged by the plague they had to leave. As a parting gift, the Tartars used catapults to hurl plague-infected corpses over the city walls. (This will not be the last time were plague victims were used in warfare. During the Eastern Crusades, infected soldiers were sent behind enemy lines to infect Ottoman camps as they died.) Some residents died almost immediately. The others dashed for their galleys and fled. They took the disease with them. In October of 1347, a fleet of Genoese trading ships landed in Messina, Sicily. The Franciscan friar, Michel of Piazza, describes its arrival in Sicily: "Twelve Genoese galleys were fleeing the vengeance which our Lord was taking account of their nefarious deeds and entered the harbor of Messina. In their bones they bore so virulent a disease that anyone who spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could evade death." The ships carried dead and dying sailors, many of who had strange growths on their necks, armpits or in their groins. Those who were alive died within days.

Sicily and then the rest of Italy were the earliest European victims of the plague. It would spread through Europe, taking the population of entire villages with it. From Sicily, the disease took three years to sweep, moving north and traveling as far as Greenland, putting an end to the European colonies that had taken root along the coast. It swallowed up many good things about humanity and whipped them out in the entire inhabited world, which was quickly divided between the dead and their frequently exhausted destitute mourners.

A German poem of the day says:  
“What misery prevailieth now?  
In all the streets throughout the land  
The houses now forsaken stand,  
And fathers’ children leave to die,  
And children from their parents fly,  
And no man hastens at the call  
Of those that stricken downward fall.”



Patients lay helpless in their dwellings no relations would come near. At most, some best friends would huddle in corners. The physicians did not dare to visit and terrified priests trembling offered the Sacraments of the Church. Children called out for parents, parents for their children, and husbands for their wife. In the end, someone might place a mortuary candle at the head of the bed before fleeing the house. The corpses would pile high in every town and the consecrated ground of the church yards were packed beyond capacity. Before the end, mass burials by the hundreds would happen outside of every city and town.

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