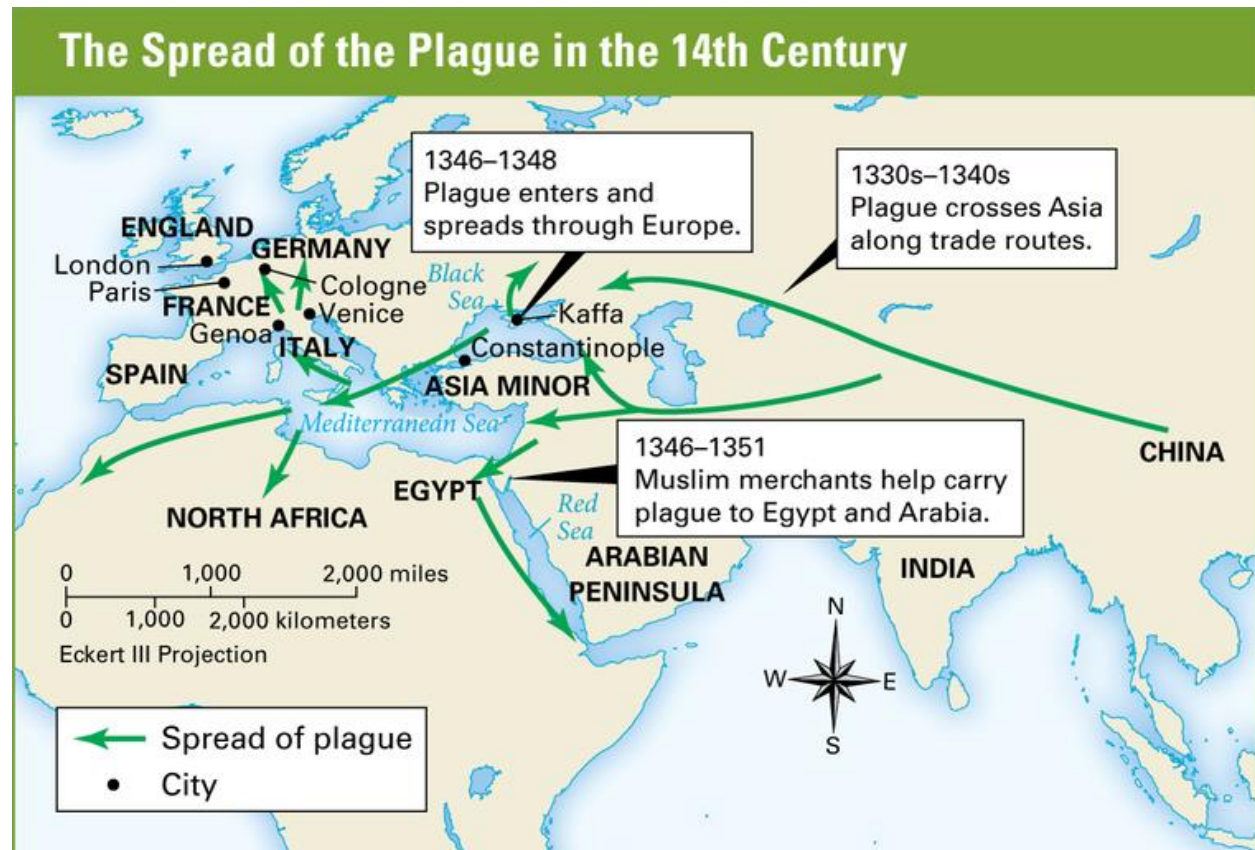


## TCI 5.3 The Bubonic Plague

In addition to political developments in England, another reason for the decline of feudalism was the [bubonic plague](#), which affected all of Europe. The bubonic plague first struck Europe from 1346 to 1351. It returned in waves that occurred about every decade into the 15th century, leaving major changes in its wake.

Historians suspect that the plague began in Central Asia, possibly in China, and spread throughout China, India, the Middle East, and eventually to Europe. The disease traveled from Central Asia to the Black Sea along the Silk Road (the main trade route between Asia and the Mediterranean Sea). It probably was carried to Italy on a ship, causing it to spread north and west, throughout the continent of Europe and to England.



**The Black Death** - Symptoms, or signs, of the plague included fever, fierce coughing and sneezing fits, and egg-sized swellings or bumps, called *buboes*. The term "Black Death" probably came from these black-and-blue swellings that appeared on the skin of victims.

The dirty conditions in which people lived contributed significantly to the spread of the bubonic plague. The bacteria that cause the disease are carried by fleas that feed on the blood of infected rodents. When the animal dies, the fleas jump to other animals and people. During the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for people to go for many months without a change of clothing or a bath. Rodents, covered with fleas, often roamed the floors

## TCI 5.3 The Bubonic Plague

of homes looking for food. City streets were filled with human waste, dead animals, and trash.

At the time, though, no one knew where the disease came from or how it spread. Terrified people falsely blamed the plague on everything from the positions of the planets to lepers and to Jews.

Persecution of the Jews did not begin with the plague. Prejudice against Jews provoked the English government to order all Jews to leave the country in 1290. In France, the same thing happened in 1306 and again in 1394. Fear of the plague made matters worse, and during the Black Death, many German cities ordered Jews to leave.

**The Impact of the Plague** - The plague took a terrible toll on Asian and European populations. China's population was reduced by nearly half between 1200 and 1393, probably because of the plague and famine. Travelers reported that dead bodies covered the ground in Central Asia and India.

Some historians estimate that 24 million Europeans died of the plague—about a third of the entire population. The deaths of so many people accelerated, or sped up, changes in Europe's economic and social structure, which contributed to the decline of feudalism.

Trade and commerce slowed almost to a halt during the plague years. As Europe began to recover, the economy needed to be rebuilt, but it wouldn't be rebuilt in the same way because feudal lords no longer held most of the power.

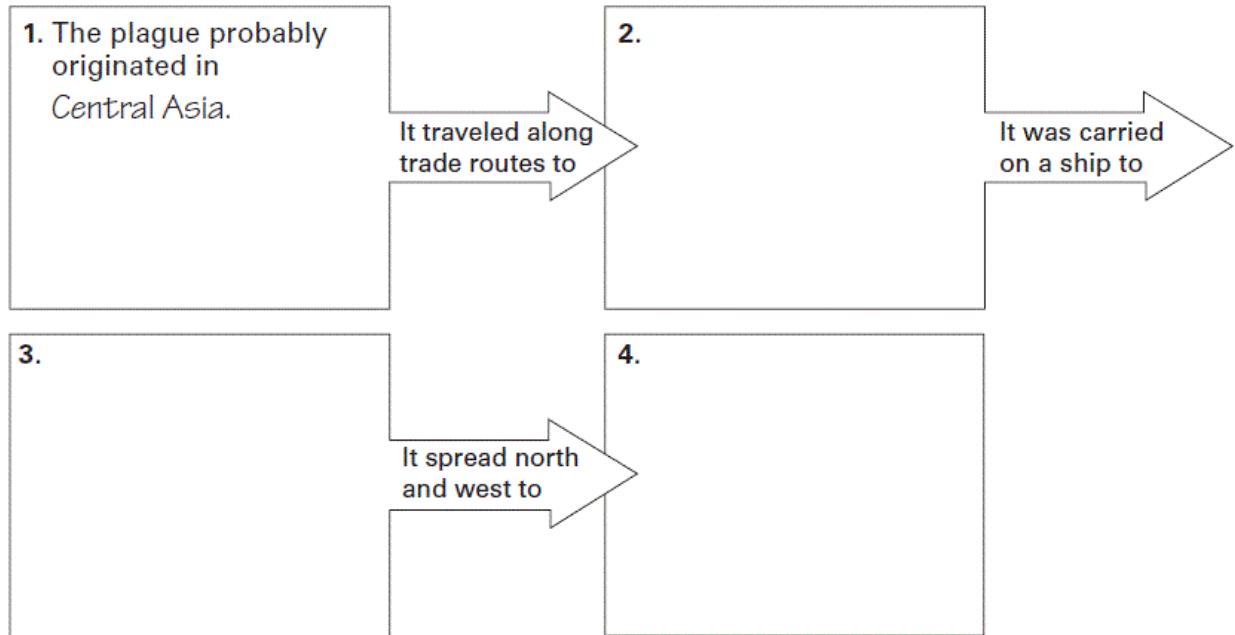
After the plague, there was a shift in power from nobles to the common people. One reason for this change was a desperate need for workers because so many people had died. The workers who did survive could, therefore, demand more money and more rights. In addition, many peasants and some serfs abandoned feudal manors and moved to towns and cities, seeking better opportunities. This led to a weakening of the manor system and a loss of power for feudal lords.

After the plague, a number of peasant rebellions broke out. When nobles tried to return to the system from before the plague, resentment exploded across Europe. There were peasant revolts throughout Europe in France, England, Germany, Spain, and Italy.

The most famous of these revolts was the English Peasants' War in 1381. The English rebels succeeded in entering London and presenting their demands to the king, Richard II. The leader of the rebellion was killed, however, and after his death, the revolt lost momentum. Still, in most of Europe, the time was coming when serfdom would end.

## TCI 5.3 The Bubonic Plague

1. Write the names of places in the diagram below to describe how the bubonic plague spread in the 14th century.



2. Why was the plague called the “Black Death”? What were some of the common symptoms?

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3. How did people become infected with the plague?

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4. List examples of how the outbreak of the bubonic plague in Europe contributed to the decline of feudalism and the rise of democratic thought.

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