

Volume 19

Number 009

History's Turning Points – The Black Death – I

Lead: Historical study often helps reveal twists in the human journey. We examine history's turning points: Consider the Black Death.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: In early October 1347, a ship left the city of Caffa in Southern Russia, bound for the Sicilian port of Messina. Along with its cargo it played host to its usual compliment of migratory black rats. They in turn were infested with tiny fleas bearing the deadly bacillus, identified finally in

1800s as *pasteurella pestis*, the bubonic plague.

By January the disease, spread by the bite of infected fleas and also through the air and by touch, had spread throughout Italy and was moving into southern France. In the summer of 1348 ships arrived in Bristol on the southern coast of England and the visiting rats soon spread their fatal cargo throughout the realm of King Edward III. Before the plague ran its course in the next two decades perhaps as much as a third of the population of Europe was wiped out. In England nearly a million and a half of a population of 4.2 million died. In some of the crowded Italian cities

such as Florence over half the population fell victim.

The pandemic was vastly complicated by wretched sanitary conditions. Medieval Europe was a dirty place in which to live. The streets were narrow and dark, filled with mud, trash, and excrement. Once a person was infected, if a buba or boil appeared in the arm pit or groin it would be followed by black spots caused by bleeding under the skin. The final stage was severe coughing and vomiting of blood. At that point death was almost certain. Often the victims were just tossed into the street as so much rubbish, left to die alone a horrible death.

There was no cure for this disease, nor could physicians or priests or theologians or government officials explain from where it came or if it would ever end. Next time: the results of disaster.

At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.

Resources

Boorstin, Daniel J. and Gerald Parshall, "History's Hidden Turning Points," *U.S. News and World Report*. 110 (15, April 22, 1991): 52-66.

Gottfried, Robert Steven. *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe*. New York, NY: Collier/Macmillan, 1983.

Smith, Geddes. *Plague On Us*. New York. NY: Oxford University, 1941.