

6 THE BLACK DEATH REACHES BRITAIN 1348–1350

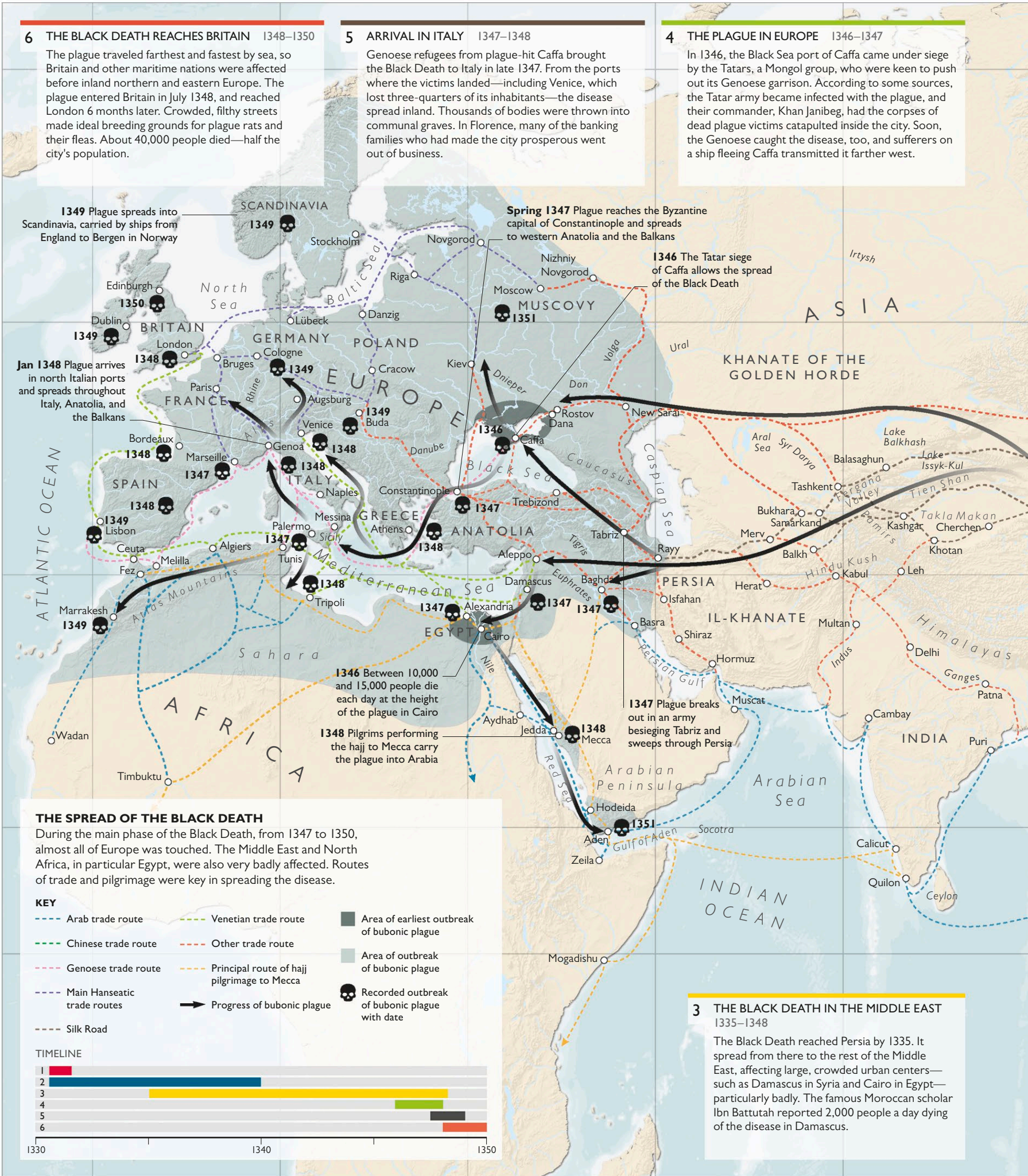
The plague traveled farthest and fastest by sea, so Britain and other maritime nations were affected before inland northern and eastern Europe. The plague entered Britain in July 1348, and reached London 6 months later. Crowded, filthy streets made ideal breeding grounds for plague rats and their fleas. About 40,000 people died—half the city's population.

5 ARRIVAL IN ITALY 1347–1348

Genoese refugees from plague-hit Caffa brought the Black Death to Italy in late 1347. From the ports where the victims landed—including Venice, which lost three-quarters of its inhabitants—the disease spread inland. Thousands of bodies were thrown into communal graves. In Florence, many of the banking families who had made the city prosperous went out of business.

4 THE PLAGUE IN EUROPE 1346–1347

In 1346, the Black Sea port of Caffa came under siege by the Tatars, a Mongol group, who were keen to push out its Genoese garrison. According to some sources, the Tatar army became infected with the plague, and their commander, Khan Janibeg, had the corpses of dead plague victims catapulted inside the city. Soon, the Genoese caught the disease, too, and sufferers on a ship fleeing Caffa transmitted it farther west.



1349 Plague spreads into Scandinavia, carried by ships from England to Bergen in Norway

Spring 1347 Plague reaches the Byzantine capital of Constantinople and spreads to western Anatolia and the Balkans

1346 The Tatar siege of Caffa allows the spread of the Black Death

Jan 1348 Plague arrives in north Italian ports and spreads throughout Italy, Anatolia, and the Balkans

1346 Between 10,000 and 15,000 people die each day at the height of the plague in Cairo

1348 Pilgrims performing the hajj to Mecca carry the plague into Arabia

1347 Plague breaks out in an army besieging Tabriz and sweeps through Persia

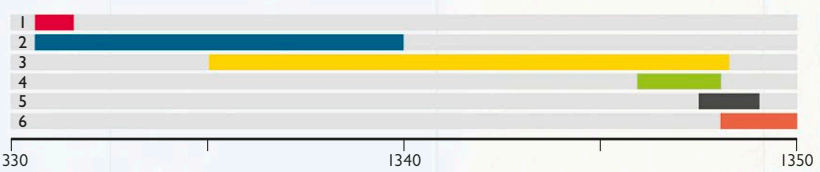
THE SPREAD OF THE BLACK DEATH

During the main phase of the Black Death, from 1347 to 1350, almost all of Europe was touched. The Middle East and North Africa, in particular Egypt, were also very badly affected. Routes of trade and pilgrimage were key in spreading the disease.

KEY

- Arab trade route
- Venetian trade route
- Chinese trade route
- Other trade route
- Genoese trade route
- Principal route of hajj pilgrimage to Mecca
- Main Hanseatic trade routes
- Progress of bubonic plague
- Silk Road
- Area of earliest outbreak of bubonic plague
- Area of outbreak of bubonic plague
- ☠ Recorded outbreak of bubonic plague with date

TIMELINE



3 THE BLACK DEATH IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1335–1348

The Black Death reached Persia by 1335. It spread from there to the rest of the Middle East, affecting large, crowded urban centers—such as Damascus in Syria and Cairo in Egypt—particularly badly. The famous Moroccan scholar Ibn Battutah reported 2,000 people a day dying of the disease in Damascus.

THE BLACK DEATH

In 1347, a new disease entered Europe from China and central Asia. The bubonic plague, or Black Death (after the black spots it caused on the skin), spread rapidly, and, with no cure available, killed around 150 million people—roughly one-third of the world’s population.

The Black Death was transmitted through the bite of infected rat fleas, so it spread quickly in the crowded, unsanitary conditions of medieval towns. It moved along trade routes once it reached Italy in 1347, and over time developed into more virulent forms. Doctors prescribed sweet-smelling posies, complex brews of herbs and spices, and the fumigation of rooms, only the last of which—by killing the fleas—had the slightest effect in stopping the epidemic’s course. Those who tried to flee simply spread the disease to new areas.

The disease caused terror and an outpouring of mysticism, and also had profound social consequences. There was a huge rise in crime—the murder rate in England doubled—as people broke faith with traditional values. Peasants, now scarce in number, could demand better conditions and pay from their feudal masters.

By the end of 1350, the Black Death had mainly run its course, but there were many recurrences; even today, there are occasional cases all over the world.

“They sickened by the thousands daily, and died unattended and without help.”

GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO, FROM THE DECAMERON, 1348–1353

