The Black Death

The Black Death (also known at various points in history as the Bubonic Plague and the Plague of Justinian) was one of the worst pandemics in history. Today we know that the Black Death was caused by a rod-shaped bacteria called Yersina pestis, discovered by the French biologist Alexandre Yersin at the close of the 19th century. We also know that it travelled both through the air and through bites from fleas and rats. But when the Black Death was ravaging the world hundreds of years ago, people did not understand how or why it was happening. It was so virulent that it could be contracted during the day and kill its host before the next morning.

The most up-to-date research on the pathogen suggests that it may have existed in Europe as much as 5,000 years ago. It was most common on ships. The situation became a pandemic because some rats would frequently find their way to shore in each port, bringing the disease to the population with them and eventually carrying the disease all over Europe and Asia.

The first major outbreak (the Plague of Justinian) was in 541 and 542 A.D., when it killed an estimated between 30 and 50 million people in Asia, North Africa, Arabia, and Europe. In the early 1340s, the Black Death appeared in China, India, Persia, Syria and Egypt. It made its appearance in Europe in October 1347 in the Sicilian port city of Messina. The Black Death killed over tens of millions of people in Europe over the next five years. It returned to Europe several more times up until the 18th century.

The Black Death affects the lymph glands, either on the groin or under the armpits, which become large and swollen (a condition called "buboes"). These swollen areas emitted blood and pus. Victims also suffered from fever, chills, vomiting, diarrhea, aches and pains.