ON MARCH 15, 2013, the construction of an underground rail line in London suddenly halted. Eight feet below the surface of the modern metropolis, the excavation had uncovered a mass grave. A team of archaeologists rushed to the site, exhuming 13 bodies and collecting the evidence of history. The manner and location of their burial testified to the date of their death. They had died in the last months of 1348, and their corpses were quickly interred on the outskirts of medieval London. In better times they would have been buried in churchyards, but these were the worst of times.

Many thought it the end of time: A devouring plague threatened the extinction of mankind. As those 13 had died, covered in boils and coughing blood, so did half the population of London and one-third the population of England. That grim toll was exacted throughout Europe: One-third of its population—at least 25 million—succumbed to the pandemic remembered as the Black Death.

In its studies of bacteriology, modern science has traced the plague's origins to Asia. Medieval chroniclers had believed that, too. They attributed the disease to the Mongols and their 1346 siege of Caffa, a Genoese-held port in the Crimea. Already frustrated by the Genoese resistance, the Mongols then suffered an outbreak of plague in their camp. The horde commander thought that the disaster might succeed where his soldiers had failed; he had catapults fling the plague corpses into the Genoese fort. And so the plague came to Caffa. The city held out, however, and the siege was lifted in 1347. But when Genoese ships left the port, they carried the plague with them. Their ports of call would be the Black Death's itinerary.

In May, the ships docked in Constantinople; by July, the plague was ravaging the city. The capital of the Byzantine Empire, the crossroads of European and Asian trade, Constantinople was one of the largest cities in Christendom. A third of its population died. In his memoirs, the Byzantine Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos described the symptoms of his dying son: the swelling growths known as buboes, the fever and the blood-spewing cough. The victim's blood vessels would disintegrate, causing dark splotches under the skin. This manifestation gave the plague its name: the Black Death. The emperor's anguished narrative would recur in every language, in every region of Europe and the Middle East.

From infection to death, the course of the disease was some five weeks. Until the final week, however, the victim did not even seem ill. Yet, he was contagious and spreading the plague, sometimes by his sneeze but more often by his fleas. With the abysmal standards of hygiene in the Middle Ages, the blood-sucking insect was a common

Left: “The Black Death,” an 1877 woodcut by Friedrich Hottenroth, depicts the Plague in Germany, 1349. Above: Miniature from the Toggenburg Bible (Switzerland) of 1411.
companion, and no one imagined it fatal. But as fleas leaped from the diseased to the healthy, they were the primary conveyance of the plague. Just as the fleas from a Mongol corpse had infected the Genoese, the Genoese walking the wharfs of Constantinople spread their fleas to the sailors and traders of other nations.

An Arab chronicler described how the plague arrived in Egypt that September. A ship left Constantinople with more than 300 people on board: 32 merchants, a full crew and a cargo of slaves. When the ship reached Alexandria, only 40 were still alive. Alexandria was the commercial center of the Islamic world, and caravans to Baghdad and pilgrimages to Mecca would carry the plague.

Meanwhile, ships were docking in Sicily. From there, death sailed on to Naples, Venice, Pisa and Genoa; people fleeing the infected ports brought the plague to Florence and Rome. By the end of 1347, the Black Death had desolated all of Italy and spread to southern France. Spanish ships brought it to England. English ships brought it to Scandinavia; Scandinavians spread the plague through the Baltic. And from the stricken ports, the refugees brought the Black Death to cities and towns far from the sea.

The plague was at its worst in the cities. The medieval streets and the sewers were one and the same. In such conditions, infection was effortless. London and Paris lost half of their populations to the plague. Giovanni Boccaccio described the plight in Florence: “Such was the multitude of corpses brought to the churches every day and almost every hour that there was not enough consecrated ground to give them burial, especially since they wanted to bury each person in the family grave, according to the old custom. Although the cemeteries were full, they were forced to dig huge trenches, where they buried the bodies by hundreds. Here they stowed them.

**WORLDWIDE: Death by the Numbers**

- **The Black Death (late 1340s):** 75 million to 200 million died*
- **Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1919:** 50 million died
- **World War I:** 16 million died
- **World War II:** 60 million died

*all figures are estimated
away like bales in the hold of a ship and covered them with a little earth, until the whole trench was full.”

There were just too many dead to bury. In Southern France, the Catholic Church consecrated the Rhone River for dumping bodies. The poor, being malnourished and living in squalid conditions, were the most likely to die. Yet, a king of Castile and an English princess also succumbed. The archbishop of Canterbury died of the plague, as did his successor and his successor’s successor—all within a year. From 1347 to 1353, at least 25 million in Europe died, as did another 75 million in North Africa and the Middle East. One hundred million dead in the 14th century would be approximately one-quarter of all mankind.

Medicine had no treatment for the plague or even an understanding of its nature. Doctors who tried lancing the buboes only succeeded in infecting themselves. In 1348, the best minds at the University of Paris concluded that the plague resulted from the conjunction of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn drawing poisonous vapors from the Earth. In their report, these medieval scholars recommended breathing only northerly winds or at least filtering one’s breath with a bouquet of scented herbs.

The certainties of the Middle Ages had died, too, in the plague. The Church had failed to protect mankind, and a sense of religious alienation broiled in England and Germany.

The English would remember that prescription as “a pocketful of posies.” However, that rhyme ends with the prognosis, “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down.”

Others saw the plague as the wrath of God. To atone for mankind’s sins, people would flay themselves with whips. Mobs of these penitents—Flagellants—would go from town to town, making a public display of their torment. Others found a more traditional outlet for mass hysteria: scapegoats. When the plague ravaged Cyprus, the island’s Muslims were blamed and slaughtered. In Western Europe, the victims were Jews. They were accused of causing the plague by poisoning wells. Two hundred Jewish communities in France, Switzerland and Germany were wiped out. Pope Clement VI condemned these attacks, asserting the Jews were blameless. He was a voice of reason in the midst of terror.

Where the plague struck, death reigned for a year; then it ended, leaving the survivors lost in a different world. The certainties of the Middle Ages had died, too, in the plague. The Church had failed to protect mankind, and a sense of religious alienation broiled in England and Germany. The earliest outbreaks of rebellion would be crushed, but the dissension remained and would eventually triumph. In Italy, the educated developed a secular perspective, and humanism challenged the constraints of tradition. This intellectual fervor, expressed in art and literature, would be the beginnings of the Renaissance. In Western Europe, the feudal order had collapsed; those who survived were no longer content with the status quo. The dissatisfied peasant simply walked off the land and sought a trade in the town; the remaining peasant refused to be treated like property. His wages would be determined by his labor, not his ancestry. Even without an edict by King or Parliament, serfdom had effectively ended.

The Black Death was the scourge of mankind, an unprecedented horror in history. Yet, in its wake was the beginning of our modern world. 

Flagellants, like the one depicted in this 16th-century woodcut by Jost Amman, saw the plague as the wrath of God. To atone for mankind’s sins, they would flay themselves with whips in a public display of their torment.