

“The Black Death Strikes Sicily,” by Michael Platiensis



ABOUT THE READING The Black Death struck Europe with astonishing speed and deadliness in the 1340s. Michael Platiensis' 1357 account brings to life the terror and desperation of townspeople on the coast of Sicily infected by arriving sailors.



As you read ask yourself how you would have responded in the conditions described.

At the beginning of October, in . . . 1347, twelve Genoese **galleys** . . . entered the harbor of Messina. In their bones they bore so **virulent** a disease that anyone who only spoke to them was seized by a mortal illness and in no manner could **evade** death. The infection spread to everyone who had any contact with the diseased. Those infected felt themselves penetrated by a pain throughout their whole bodies and, so to say, **undermined**. Then there developed on the thighs or upper arms a boil about the size of a lentil which the people called “burn boil.” This infected the whole body, and penetrated it so that the patient violently vomited blood. This vomiting of blood continued without intermission for three days, there being no means of healing it, and then the patient expired.

Not only all those who had speech with them died, but also those who had touched or used any of their things. When the inhabitants of Messina discovered that this sudden death **emanated** from the Genoese ships they hurriedly ordered them out of the harbor and town. But the evil remained and

VOCABULARY

galleys long, low trading ships

virulent extremely poisonous

evade escape

undermined weakened

emanated came forth

dispersed scattered

attained achieved

pestilence fatal epidemic

The ships came from Genoa, a seaport in northwestern Italy. Messina is a city on the northeast coast of Sicily.

The disease caused painful red swellings on the skin that were hot to the touch.

People could catch the plague simply by speaking with a sick person or by touching things the infected person had used.

Source: Michael Platiensis, quoted in Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague*, tr. C. H. Clarke London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1926

The Black Death Strikes Sicily, *continued*

Primary Source

caused a fearful outbreak of death. Soon men hated each other so much that if a son was attacked by the disease his father would not tend him. If, in spite of all, he dared to approach him, he was immediately infected and was bound to die within three days. Nor was this all; all those dwelling in the same house with him, even the cats and other domestic animals, followed him in death. As the number of deaths increased in Messina many desired to confess their sins to the priests and to draw up their last will and testament. But ecclesiastics, lawyers and notaries refused to enter the houses of the diseased.

Soon the corpses were lying forsaken in the houses. No ecclesiastic, no son, no father, and no relation dared to enter, but they hired servants with high wages to bury the dead. The houses of the deceased remained open with all their valuables, gold and jewels. . . . When the catastrophe had reached its climax the Messinians resolved to emigrate. One portion of them settled in the vineyards and fields, but a larger portion sought refuge in the town of Catania. The disease clung to the fugitives and accompanied them everywhere they turned in search of help. Many of the fleeing fell down by the roadside and dragged themselves into the fields and bushes to expire. Those who reached Catania breathed their last in the hospitals there. The terrified citizens would not permit the burying of fugitives from Messina within the town, and so they were all thrown into deep trenches outside the walls.

Thus the people of Messina **dispersed** over the whole island of Sicily and with them the disease, so that innumerable people died. The town of Catania lost all its inhabitants, and ultimately sank into complete oblivion When the plague had **attained**

One unusual aspect of the disease was that it attacked both humans and animals.

The lawyers, who drew up wills, would be accompanied by notaries, or officials who certify the will is legal. Ecclesiastics, or priests, would also normally be called when someone was about to die.

The entire town disappeared and was forgotten.

The Black Death Strikes Sicily, *continued*

Primary Source

its height in Catania, the patriarch endowed all ecclesiastics, even the youngest, with all priestly powers for the absolution of sin which he himself possessed as bishop and patriarch. But the **pestilence** raged from October 1347 to April 1348. The patriarch himself was one of the last to be carried off. He died fulfilling his duty. . .

The highest-ranking bishop gave emergency powers to all the clergy, so they could perform the formal act of forgiving the sins of the dying.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. What happened to bodies of people who died?

2. How did the disease spread from Messina to the rest of Sicily?

3. What do you think was the worst effect of the plague on the people of Sicily?

