

0. WHAT IS BUBONIC PLAGUE? - Story Preface

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This illustration depicting a group of ill clergy, being instructed on what to do if they are incapacitated by a debilitating illness—in this instance, leprosy—is from *Omne Bonum*, a 14th-century encyclopedia (compiled by an Exchequer clerk, [James le Palmer](#)). The original is currently maintained at the British Library in London. Although this illumination is frequently associated with plague, it actually depicts leprosy.

CAUTION: THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS DESCRIPTIONS OF A DEADLY DISEASE

What *is* this horrible disease that disfigured, and killed, so many people? It is caused by a bacterium called *Yersinia pestis*. (Follow the link to the Center for Disease Control to see an actual picture of the rod-like bacterium bacillus.)

Only one bacterium is enough to fatally infect someone!

The bacteria is found in rodents (the black rat during the great pestilence) and is transmitted from rats (and other rodents) to people by *Xenopsylla cheopis* (the oriental rat flea).

Fleas (which jump from rodents to people) parasitically lodge themselves on the backs of their hosts (the rodents). The fleas' ready food source is the blood of the host. (Note how the flea depicted in the link is engorged with its food.)

If the host is infected, the flea is likely to get infected. When the host dies, the flea needs another source of food.

That's when the trouble for people really begins (as shown in this image based on a 14th-century Flemish illustration).



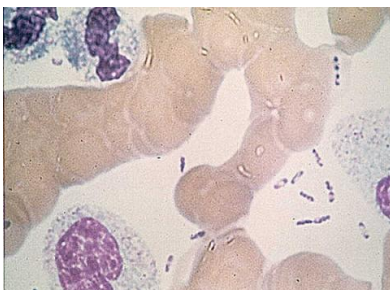
See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHAT-IS-BUBONIC-PLAGUE-Black-Death>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHAT-IS-BUBONIC-PLAGUE-Black-Death>

Media Stream



Yersinia Pestis

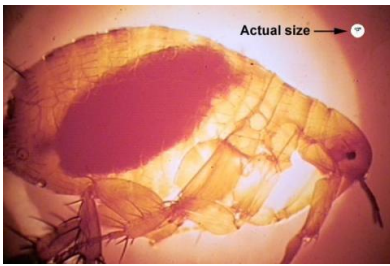
Image, Center for Disease Control.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Yersinia-Pestis>



Bubonic Plague in the 14th Century

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



Xenopsylla Cheopis - The Oriental Rat Flea

Photo, Center for Disease Control

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Xenopsylla-Cheopis-The-Oriental-Rat-Flea>



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