In the fourteenth century, Europe suffered numerous catastrophes that would go down in history as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"; a reference to the book of Revelation in which four great ordeals which Earth had to endure in its final days before judgement. The Black Death stands out as the most dramatic and lifestyle changing event during this century. This was a widespread epidemic of the Bubonic Plague that passed from Asia and through Europe in the mid fourteenth century. The first signs of the Black Plague in Europe were present around the fall of 1347. In the span of three years, the Black Death killed one third of all the people in Europe. This traumatic population change coming into the Late Middle Ages caused great changes in European culture and lifestyle.

The Black Death was one of many catastrophes to occur following an increase in population during the High Middle Ages (1000-1300). The population of Europe grew from 38 million to 74 million in this time. Prior to the onset of the fourteenth century turmoil, Europe seemed to be in a state of growth in both agriculture and structure in society. Cities began to rise with artisans, farmers, and other crafts people specializing in their own field of work. The daily life contact between European people in the cities and surrounding villages facilitated the spread of this disease, as people did not possess sufficient medical knowledge to prevent the spread of the disease with any great success. The conditions in the cities also set the stage for disease. Waste accumulated in the streets for lack of sewer systems. Houses were crowded next to each other. One could not use the rivers for drinking water due to pollution. With all of these conditions arising from the High Middle Ages, it was only a matter of time before the population was curbed by disaster. The Black Death marks the barrier between the High Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages, and the difference in Europe before and after the Black Death is clear.

The origins of the Black Death can be traced back to the Gobi Desert of Mongolia in the 1320s. From the desert, it spread out in all directions. Of most importance was the spread eastward to China. China suffered an emergence of bubonic plague during the early 1330s. During the expansion of trade during the Early and High Middle ages, trade routes with China were strengthened and ventured greatly. European traders, particularly those from the Italian city states, traveled the Black Sea region regularly. Surviving documents show that one group of traders from Genoa arrived in Sicily in October of 1347, fresh from a voyage to China. This was most likely the introduction of the plague to European lands. Along with the Chinese goods on board, the traders carried the bacterium *yersinia pestis* in the rats on board as well as in some of the sailors themselves. The Black Death had arrived in Europe.

From Sicily, the plague spread at an alarming rate. The speed at which it spread and killed, as well as the horror which accompanied the diseased, caused a panic in the Italian population. Families were forced to abandon members who were sick. Lawyers refused to form wills for the dying. Entire monasteries were wiped out when they attempted to care for the dying, which caused great fear in charitable organizations. Other European countries looked toward Italians as being the cause of the plague, and there were many incidences of healthy Italian travelers and
traders being exiled from villages or even killed out of fear of the plague spreading outside Italy. These measures proved futile, and the plague spread farther and farther north. Wherever trade routes existed, normally the plague would follow, radiating out from Italy. The Plague reached France shortly after Italy. Marseilles felt the effects in January of 1348 and Paris was infected in summer of the same year. England felt the effects in September of 1348. 1348 Europe suffered the most. By the end of 1348, Germany, France, England, Italy, and the low countries had all felt the plague. Norway was infected in 1349, and Eastern European countries began to fall victim during the early 1350s. Russia felt the effects later in 1351. By the end of this circular path around Europe, one third of all people in the infected areas had perished.

The people of Europe did not know that such a calamity was the result of a microscopic bacillus bacterium. This organism was not new to the world in the fourteenth century, it had existed for millions of years prior.

Death occurs in less than a week for humans. A high fever, aching limbs, and fatigue mark the early stages of infection. Eventually, the lymph nodes of the neck, groin, and armpit areas swell and turn black. Those black swellings on victims are what give the Black Death its name. The victim begins to vomit blood and in some instances suffer hysteria from fever and terror. Exposure to any body fluids means exposure to the bacterium, and thus spreading the disease is very easy through coughing victims. The victim dies shortly after the lymph nodes swell until bursting within the body. Within a European village, by the time the initial carrier of the disease had perished, the disease would have already taken early stages in several other individuals, making prevention extremely difficult.

When the plague first entered an area, mourners of the deceased still prepared coffins and conducted ceremonies for their loved ones. Within weeks, in response to desperation to control the sickness as well as sheer volume of the dead, officials had to resort to mass graves. There was not nearly enough consecrated ground for each victim to have an individual plot, and so enormous trenches were dug into which layer upon layer of dead bodies were lain. The trench was topped off with a small layer of soil, and the morbid process continued. Pope Clement VI even consecrated the entire Rhone river so that corpses could be thrown into it for lack of earth. Those in the peasant class who saw horrors such as these could not accept that a loving God could inflict such a plague upon His people, and considered it to be a punishment from an angry God. Some peasants resorted to magic spells, charms, and talismans. Some people burned incense or other herbs as they believed that they overpowering smell of the dead victims was the source of the disease. Some people even tried to "drive the disease away" with sound from church bells and canon fire. Jews were easy targets for people to blame, and numerous instances of Jew persecution and execution occurred. In the long run, the only "cure" for this epidemic was time, and it seemed, the shortage of new hosts for the disease.