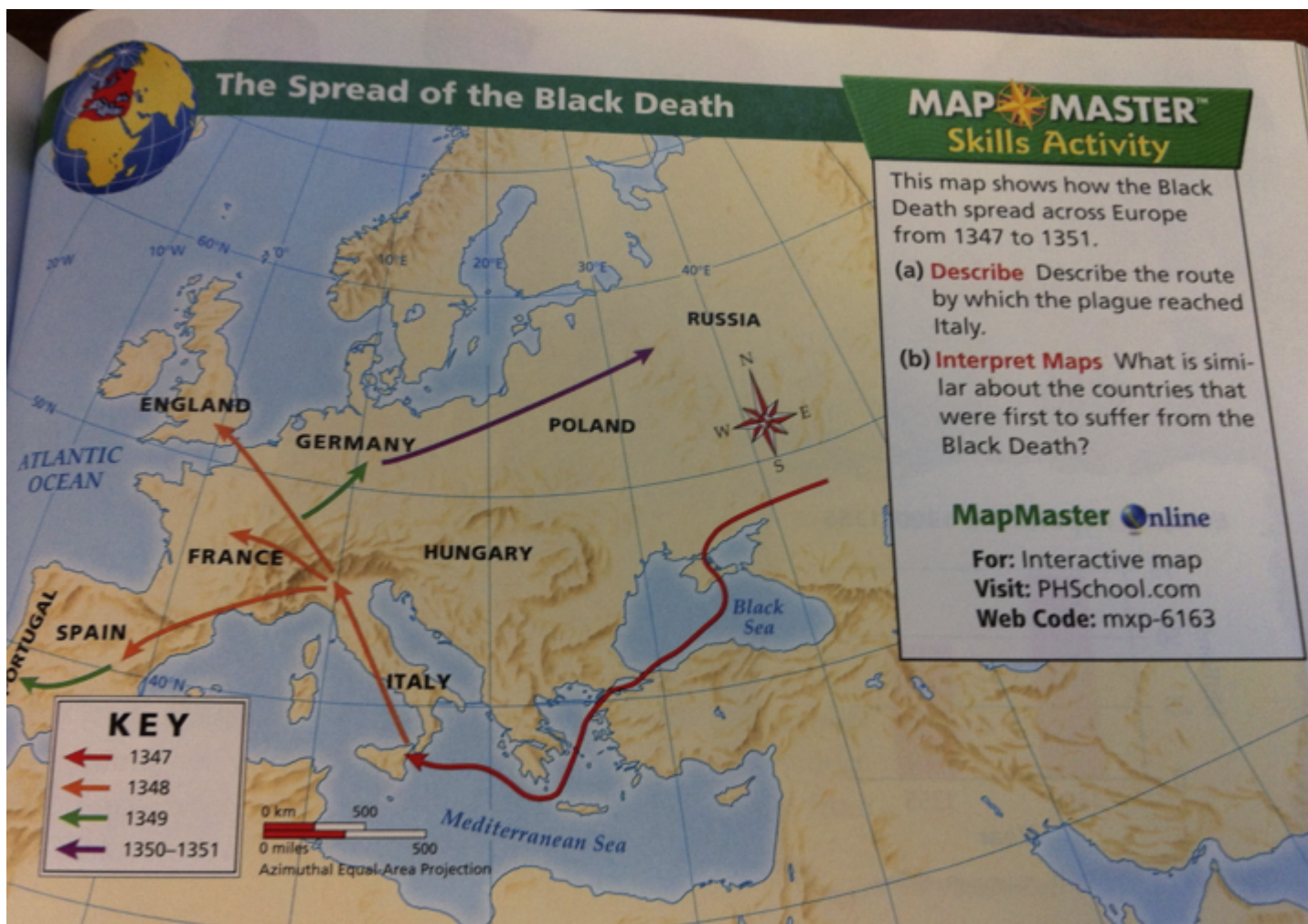


The Black Death

In 1347, Europe was struck by a terrible **epidemic**, a wide-spread outbreak of a disease. The disease was the **bubonic plague**, a deadly infection. It was called the Black Death because bleeding under the skin left black spots all over the body. Victims usually died within a few days, often in terrible agony. At the time, no one knew what caused the plague. Today, we know that it was carried by infected fleas that lived on rats.

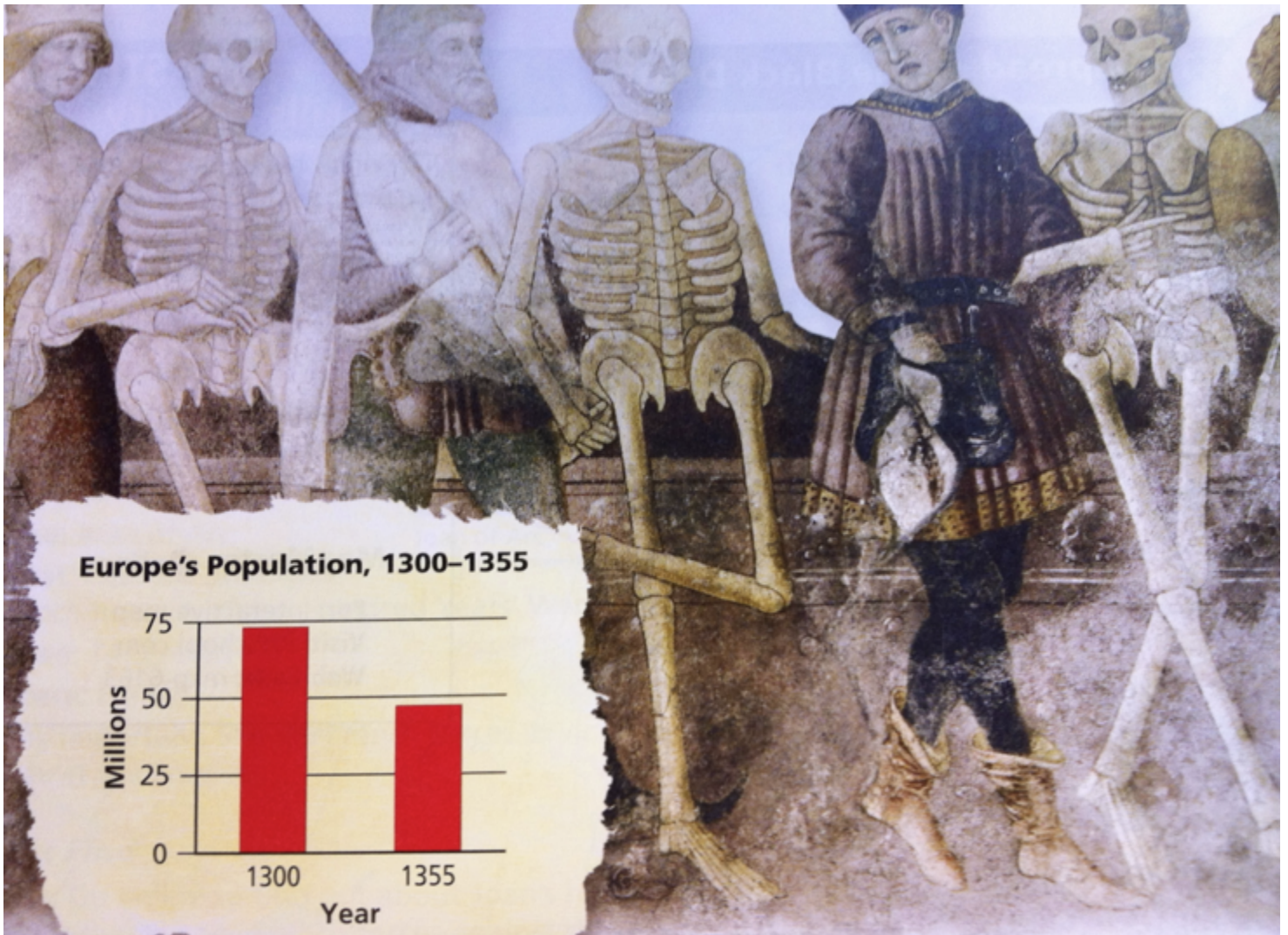
The Spread of the Disease The epidemic began in Central Asia. From there, it slowly spread along the trade networks that linked China, India, and the Middle East. Before reaching Europe, the Black Death had killed millions in Asia.



Giovanni Boccaccio lived through the plague in Florence and wrote a detailed account of what he saw:

“The plight of the lower and most of the middle classes was . . . pitiful to behold. Most of them remained in their houses, either through poverty or in hopes of safety, and fell sick by thousands. Since they received no care and attention, almost all of them died. Many ended their lives in the streets . . . many others who died in their houses were only known to be dead because the neighbours smelled their decaying bodies. Dead bodies filled every corner.”

—Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*



As many as one third of all Europeans—about 25 million people—died between 1347 and 1352, when the plague finally ran its course. Thousands of towns and villages in Europe were completely emptied.

Jews and the Black Death Terrified people, looking for scapegoats, blamed Jews. **Scapegoats are people who are blamed for a problem that they did not cause.** Some Christians, without any evidence, claimed that Jews spread the plague by poisoning wells. In many German towns, Jews were exiled or killed. In Strasbourg, the town council ordered that the 2,000 Jews convert to Christianity or be burned to death. The pope issued an order that Jews should not be killed or forced to convert. However, his order was widely ignored.

Effects of the Black Death The short-term effect of the Black Death was the loss of vast numbers of people from every part of society: peasants, merchants, priests, scholars, nobles. A terrible gloom descended over Europe. People became obsessed with death and disease.

With too few people to cultivate the land, much of the land became overgrown with brush. Because so many peasants had

died, manor lords were desperate for workers. Serfs who survived demanded wages for their work and left manors to work where wages were highest. Manor lords attempted to pass laws to limit the serfs' movements.

Peasants across Europe revolted. In 1381, English peasants mounted the Peasants' Revolt, killing local lords and burning manors. Although the revolt was put down, the traditional ties between lords and their serfs had been broken.

In the old medieval world, everyone had a place in society that was fixed at birth. After the Black Death, people were no longer tied to a stable social and spiritual community. They began to act on their own as individuals. After the Black Death, people of the Middle Ages began to enter the Modern Age.



Checkpoint How did the Black Death spread across Europe?