CHAPTER

14

Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE # Plague in Siena
by Agnolo di Tura

The bubonic plague reached the shores of Italy in 1347. This deadly disease, spread by infected fleas that lived on black rats, swept through Italy, France, Germany, and other European countries, killing about one-third of the population of Europe. As you read this firsthand account, think about the effect the plague had on the Italian city of Siena and on Agnolo di Tura.

The mortality began in Siena in May [1348]. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed to almost everyone that one became stupified by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful thing. Indeed one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately. They would swell beneath their armpits and in their groins, and fall over dead while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and sight. And so they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could, without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds both day and night, and all were thrown in those ditches and covered over with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled more were dug.

And I, Agnolo di Tura, called the Fat, buried my five children with my own hands. And there were also those who were so sparsely covered with earth that the dogs dragged them forth and devoured many bodies throughout the city.

There was no one who wept for any death, for all awaited death. And so many died that all believed that it was the end of the world. And no medicine or any other defense availed. . . . And it is found that at this time there died in Siena 36,000 persons twenty years of age or less, and the aged and other people [died], to a total of 52,000 in all in Siena. And in the suburbs of Siena 28,000 persons died; so that in all it is found that in the city and suburbs of Siena 80,000 persons died. Thus at this time Siena and its suburbs had more than

30,000 men [adult males]; and there remained in Siena [alone] less than 10,000 men. And those that survived were like persons distraught and almost without feeling. . . . I will not write of the cruelty that there was in the countryside, of the wolves and wild beasts that ate the poorly buried corpses, and of other cruelties that would be too painful to those who read them. . . .

The city of Siena seemed almost uninhabited for almost no one was found in the city. And then, when the pestilence abated [lessened], all who survived gave themselves over to pleasures: monks, priests, nuns, and lay men and women all enjoyed themselves, and none worried about spending and gambling. And everyone thought himself rich because he had escaped and regained the world, and no one knew how to allow himself to do nothing. . . .

1349. After the great pestilence of the past year each person lived according to his own caprice [impulse], and everyone tended to seek pleasure in eating and drinking, hunting, catching birds, and gaming.

from William Bowsky, ed., *The Black Death, A Turning Point in History?* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston). Reprinted in Norman F. Cantor, ed., *The Medieval Reader* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 280–281.

Activity Options

1. *Perceiving Cause and Effect* Draw a cause-and-effect diagram to illustrate the effects of the plague in Siena according to Agnolo di Tura.
2. *Using Visual Stimuli* Design a memorial—such as a statue, a historical plaque, or a monument—for the victims who died as a result of the plague in Siena in 1348. Share your design with classmates.

A Plague in Modern Times

Directions: Please note that this activity is not intended to scare you. It is meant to put the Black Death into a modern perspective. Imagine that a plague hit the Pennsylvanian cities in the chart below. Imagine that 30% of the population will die because of the plague. Your job is to figure out how many people will perish in these cities.

Here is how you figure it out:

Population of city multiplied by .30

Ex. 150,000 x .3=45,000 deaths

	Name	2005 Population	# of deaths
1	Philadelphia	1,463,281	
2	Pittsburgh	316,718	
3	Allentown	106,992	
4	Erie	102,612	
5	Reading	80,855	
6	Scranton	73,120	
7	Bethlehem	72,895	
8	Lancaster	54,757	
9	Levittown	53,500	