So many people died so swiftly that proper burial was impossible (see Figure 12.2 for one mass burial). One observer spoke, for example, of ships floating aimlessly on the Mediterranean with dead crews. And, in any case, fear drove many people to abandon the sick, thereby also abandoning many basic social obligations. As one inhabitant of Siena wrote:

Father abandoned child; wife, husband; one brother, another; for this illness seemed to strike through the breath and the sight. And so they died. And no one could be found to bury the dead for money or for friendship. . . . And in many places in Siena huge pits were dug and piled deep with huge heaps of the dead. . . . And there were many corpses about the city who were so sparsely covered with earth that dogs dragged them forth and devoured their bodies.

In these first, frightening years, the Great Plague killed social ties as well as people.

Map 12.2 The Spread of the Great Plague, 1347–1350 When the plague reached Europe late in 1347, it first assaulted the islands of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica and then the Mediterranean coast to their north. Thereafter, it moved steadily inland. By the summer of 1348, it was afflicting the people of Paris, and by the end of 1349, virtually all the medieval West was in its grip. We do not know why a few regions escaped relatively unscathed.