

Pandemics and passages to late antiquity: rethinking the plague of c.249-270 described by Cyprian

Kyle Harper

I. The forgotten pandemic

Pandemic events are surpassingly rare in human history. Yet the period we call late antiquity could be considered the age of pandemic disease. It began and ended with the Antonine plague that erupted in the mid-160s A.D. and the Justinianic plague of the mid-6th c. Modern interest in these pandemics has waxed and waned. It was long taken for granted that these events played a major rôle in the fate of the Roman empire. In the mid-20th c., however, attention subsided. Historical demography struggled to make inroads into the discipline of ancient history.¹ In the case of the Antonine plague, a critical article of J. F. Gilliam turned focus away from the disease for a generation.² Only in the last 20 years, with the rise of historical demography in ancient studies, and a broader interest in environmental history, have the Antonine and Justinianic plagues received their proper due.³ Attention has focused on the epidemiology and impact of these events. The Antonine plague is most plausibly identified as smallpox, based on the presentation of the disease described by the contemporary physician Galen, and should qualify as the first pandemic in all of human history. It struck the empire at the apex of its power and prosperity. Its severe demographic effects now seem widely accepted, although there is lively debate about its long-term geopolitical and social consequences.⁴ For the Justinianic plague neither its demographic scope nor the long-range consequences are in doubt. Securely identified by both clinical description and paleomolecular evidence, *Yersinia pestis* arrived in 541 and struck recurrently for over two centuries; like the Black Death in the 14th c., the first bubonic plague fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of European populations.⁵

1 See W. Scheidel, *Debating Roman demography* (Leiden 2001) 9-11.

2 J. F. Gilliam, "The plague under Marcus Aurelius," *AJPh* 94 (1961) 225-51.

3 With his "The impact of the Antonine plague," *JRA* 9 (1996) 108-36, R. P. Duncan-Jones deserves great credit for reviving interest in the Antonine plague specifically; more generally, see R. Sallares, *The ecology of the ancient Greek world* (Ithaca, NY 1991) and W. Scheidel, *Death on the Nile: disease and the demography of Roman Egypt* (Leiden 2001).

4 Duncan-Jones *ibid.*; R. S. Bagnall, "The effects of plague: model and evidence," and W. Scheidel, "A model of demographic and economic change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine plague," both in *JRA* 15 (2002) 97-114; Y. Zelener, *Smallpox and the disintegration of the Roman economy after 165 AD* (Ph.D. diss. Columbia Univ., New York 2003); C. Bruun, "The Antonine plague in Rome and Ostia," *JRA* 16 (2003) 426-34; *id.*, "The Antonine plague and the 'third-century crisis'," in O. Hekster, G. de Kleijn and D. Slootjes (edd.), *Crises and the Roman empire* (Leiden 2007) 201-17; *id.*, "La mancanza di prove di un effetto catastrofico della 'peste antonina' (dall 166 d.C. in poi)," in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della peste antonina* (Bari 2012) 123-65; Lo Cascio *ibid.*

5 J. N. Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens* (Paris 1975); M. McCormick, "Bateaux de vie, bateaux de mort. Maladie, commerce, transports annonaire et le passage économique du Bas-Empire au Moyen Âge," *Settimane Studio Centro Ital. Studi Alto Medioevo* 45 (1998) 35-118; D. Stathakopoulos, "The Justinianic plague revisited," *BMGS* 24 (2000) 255-76; P. Sarris, "The Justinianic plague: origins and effects," *Continuity & Change* 17 (2002) 169-82; M. McCormick, "Rats, communications, and plague: toward an ecological history," *J. Interdisc. Hist.* 34 (2003) 1-25; D. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine empire* (Aldershot 2004); L. K. Little, *Plague and the end of antiquity: the pandemic of*