

# An amulet from London and events surrounding the Antonine Plague

Christopher P. Jones

R. S. O. Tomlin has recently provided an excellent publication of an amulet found in the City of London in 1989.<sup>1</sup> It is a long, narrow strip cut from a sheet of pewter, with 30 lines of Greek text, and the bearer was a certain Demetri(o)s. By a curious coincidence, two of the Greek inscriptions of Britain also involve a Demetrios, though a different one. They are inscribed on two bronze plates found in York about 1840. One reads Θεοῖς τοῖς τοῦ ἡγεμονικοῦ πραιτωρίου Σκριβ(ώνιος) Δημήτριος, the other Ὁκεανῶ καὶ Τηθύι Δημήτρι[ος], and the bearer is presumably identical with a *grammaticus* from Tarsus of the same name, described as having come from Britain to Delphi in one of Plutarch's dialogues.<sup>2</sup> This note mainly treats the second of two hexameter oracles incorporated in the text of the London amulet, but I begin by discussing the text as a whole. With Tomlin's text and translation, this runs as follows:

αβραι βαρβασω, / βαρβασωχ<sup>vac</sup> βαρβασωθ ευλιωρ / αθεμορφι, λάβρου / (5) λυμοῦ  
παράπεμ/πε δυσκέλαδον / ῥύζημα, διήριον, ταυχιζον, νυδρολεες, ὀ/(10)δύμης δια-  
μηχόμαιμον, βα/ρύθοιμον, εαρκο/τακές, διατηκόμε/νον, φλεβίων ἄ/(15)πὸ κόλπων.  
μέ/γας Ιάω, μέ/γας Σαβαώθ, / διαφύλαξον τὸν / φοροῦντα. Φοῖβε / (20) ἀκερσεκόμα,  
το/ξότα, λοιμοῦ νε/φέλησι ἀπέλαυ/νε. Ιάω, Αβρασ/ἄξ θεέ, βοηθεῖ. (25) Φοῖβος ἄπαξ  
ἐκέλευσεν βρο/τοῖς χιλεων ἄ/πέχεσθαι. Κύρι / θεέ, τηρήσον / (30) Δημήτριον.

*Abrai Barbasô Barbasôch Barbasôth. +euliôr, +athemorphi, send away the discordant clatter of raging plague, air-borne, +tanychizon, +nydrolees, infiltrating pain, heavy-spiriting, flesh-wasting, melting, from the hollows of the veins. Great Iao, great Sabaoth, protect the bearer. Phoebus of the unshorn hair, archer, drive away the cloud of plague. Iao, god Abrasax, bring help. Phoebus once ordered mortals to refrain from +chileôn. Lord God, watch over Demetrios.*

As Tomlin shows, in its formulas and language the amulet resembles others found in many parts of the Empire.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it has the distinctive feature of referring to an oracle issued at the time of the Antonine Plague, and thus confirms an observation first made by R. P. Duncan-Jones, that the series of dated lead ingots in Britain ends in the 160s, and hence that the Plague could have reached Rome's most northwesterly province.<sup>4</sup> The Plague entered the Roman empire about 165, and among the oracular shrines consulted in

1 R. S. O. Tomlin, "Drive away the cloud of plague: a Greek amulet from Roman London," in R. Collins and F. McIntosh (edd.), *Life in the Limes* (Oxford 2014) 197-205.

2 *RIB* 1.662-63, with previous bibliography; Plut. *De def. orac.* 410A. The only Greek inscriptions on stone that I have noticed are both altars set up by Greek doctors, *RIB* 1.461 and 3.3151 (both from Chester): ones on gems, rings, etc., are naturally more common, and are listed in *RIB* 2: *Combined Epigraphic Indexes* 49-50.

3 For a characteristic example, see C. A. Faraone and R. Kotansky, "An inscribed gold phylactery in Stamford, Connecticut," *ZPE* 75 (1988) 257-66.

4 R. P. Duncan-Jones, "The impact of the Antonine Plague," *JRA* 9 (1996) 121 n.118. A mass grave in Gloucester has been very tentatively connected with the Plague: A. Simmonds *et al.*, *Life and death in a Roman city: excavation of a Roman cemetery with a mass grave at 120-122 London Road, Gloucester* (Oxford 2008), sceptically reviewed by S. E. Cleary, *Britannia* 40 (2009) 389-90 and H. R. Hurst, *JRA* 23 (2010) 633-38. On the causes and effects of the Plague in Egypt, see C. P. Elliott, "The Antonine plague, climate change and local violence in Roman Egypt," *PastPres* 231 (2016), 3-31; on its overall impact, K. Harper, *Climate change, infectious disease, and the fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 2, "Apollo's revenge" (forthcoming, Princeton Univ. Press).