An amulet from London and events surrounding the Antonine Plague

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R. S. O. Tomlin has recently provided an excellent publication of an amulet found in the City of London in 1989.1 It is a long, narrow strip cut from a sheet of pewter, with 30 lines of Greek text, and the bearer was a certain Demetrio(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 Ὀκεανῷ καὶ Τηθύι Δημήτριος, 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.2 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:


As Tomlin shows, in its formulas and language the amulet resembles others found in many parts of the Empire.3 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.4 The Plague entered the Roman empire about 165, and among the oracular shrines consulted in

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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.