

# Another eyewitness to the plague described by Cyprian, with notes on the “Persecution of Decius”

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In *JRA* 28 (2015), I published a study of the sources for the pandemic mortality event that struck the Roman Empire during the years A.D. c.249-270.<sup>1</sup> Although relatively neglected in recent historiography, this pandemic is surprisingly well attested both by contemporary witnesses and by later sources reflecting the earlier tradition. The study identified at least 6 contemporary testimonies and 6 other independent lines of transmission about the disease, disentangling some two dozen sources of information down through the Late Byzantine chronicles. The plague described by Cyprian, despite progressing against the backdrop of one of the most poorly documented phases of Roman history, has left behind a body of literary evidence that in sheer volume exceeds the testimony for the better-studied Antonine plague of the late 2nd c.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the evidence for the plague described by Cyprian is, collectively, quite compelling; the consistency of independent testimony adds credence to the claims of a major mortality event. My study claimed to have gathered the ancient sources “comprehensively and collectively”, but such claims are precarious and an electronic search of the *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts* has uncovered yet another (seventh) contemporary witness to the pandemic.

The *De laude martyrii* (hereafter *DLM*) is a text that has descended to us within the corpus of Cyprian’s writings.<sup>3</sup> In the 19th c., its authenticity was disputed, and no one since has believed that it was from the hand of the Carthaginian bishop. A. Harnack argued that its author was the Roman schismatic Novatian, but this thesis failed to convince the field.<sup>4</sup> Recent work by L. Ciccolini, including a forthcoming critical edition in the *Corpus Christianorum*, has advanced our knowledge of the setting, text and transmission of the work.<sup>5</sup> The *DLM* is certainly the work of a N African Christian contemporary with the plague, written probably in c.252-253 in the orbit of the great Carthaginian cleric. Although its author remains anonymous, it is almost precisely contemporary with Cyprian’s *De mortalitate* and *Ad Demetrianum*, written against the backdrop of both the pandemic and the persecutions of that period. The text is a panegyric in praise of martyrdom and an encouragement to the faithful. The relevant text from Ciccolini’s new edition follows, with an English translation:

8.1. Aut non cotidiana cernimus funera, cernimus nouos exitus, diuturnis factis et saeuientibus morbis inexpertae cuiusdam cladis exitia ac stragem popularum urbium intuemur?

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1 “Pandemics and passages to late antiquity: rethinking the plague of c.249-70 described by Cyprian,” *JRA* 28 (2015) 223-60.

2 R. P. Duncan-Jones, “The impact of the Antonine plague,” *JRA* 9 (1996) 108-36; A. S. Marino, “Una rilettura delle fonti storico-letterarie sulla peste di età antonina,” in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L’impatto della “peste antonina”* (Bari 2012) 29-62.

3 A new edition is forthcoming from L. Ciccolini in the *Corpus Christianorum*. The old text is published as G. Hartel, *Thasci Caecili Cypriani opera omnia*, vol. 3 (Vienna 1871) 26-52.

4 A. Harnack, *Eine bisher nicht erkannte Schrift Novatian’s vom Jahre 249/50* (‘Cyprian’, *De laude martyrii*) (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur; Leipzig 1895). For a complete discussion, see the Introduction to Ciccolini’s new edition.

5 Also L. Ciccolini, *L’heritage litteraire de Cyprien de Carthage à travers les écrits pseudépigraphes* (Thèse de doctorat, Univ. Paris-Sorbonne 2007); C. Dell’Osso, *Trattati* (Rome 2013) 9-39; A. Hayden, *De laude martyrii: a translation with introduction* (M.A. thesis, Catholic Univ. of America, Washington, DC 1955).