

The impact of the Antonine plague

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The focus of this article is the plague under Marcus Aurelius, and its effects on the Roman empire.¹ The historical record is mainly late and fragmentary, enough so to allow the widest disparities in interpretation despite some contemporary evidence. But progress towards a more stable view can be made by assessing the ancient plague tradition as a whole, and by fuller examination of the Antonine evidence. The various non-literary sources show signs of an abrupt check under Marcus, which closely coincides with the known chronology of the plague.

A cataclysmic event potentially had such an impact on pre-industrial society that it was more likely to suppress record-keeping than to encourage it. As a result, much of what is available here consists of broken or dislocated record-sequences. But levels of documentation immediately before the plague were generally high, and they suggest some striking contrasts with what followed. There is also limited recording of events during and after the plague, some of it vivid.

1. Plague and plague evidence

A. Introduction: epidemic disease

Attempts have often been made to identify ancient epidemics, such as the plague in 5th-c. Athens described by Thucydides.² But conclusive diagnosis remains elusive. Although lethal epidemics remained a constant threat, no effective taxonomy of epidemic disease was developed in antiquity or even in the pre-modern period as a whole.³ As a result, historians who attempt to describe an epidemic may mention symptoms, but normally cannot give a medical name to the disease.⁴ Medical writers can be equally imprecise: Galen calls the contemporary epidemic under Marcus Aurelius 'the great plague', failing to distinguish it from other epidemics except in degree.⁵ Appropriate medical terminology either did not exist, or lay outside the main literary tradition.⁶ Historians mainly relied on vague words such as 'disease',

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2 Discussions of the Athenian plague are now very numerous: see K. H. Leven, "Thucydides und die "Pest" in Athen," *Medizin historisches Journal* 26 (1991) 128-60.

3 "[In Arabic] the common descriptive term used for most of the pestilences before the Black Death was *waba*, which may mean any epidemic disease, such as typhus, smallpox, cholera, etc." (M. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* [1975] 35). "There was little appreciation that individual diseases were separable entities before 1600." (P. Slack, *The impact of plague in Tudor and Stuart England* [1975] 25). "[In 15th-c. England] when a disease is mentioned in the narrative sources or even in a contemporary medical treatise, it is usually called by the generic name 'pestilence' and identified by its symptoms." (R. S. Gottfried, *Epidemic disease in c15 England: the medical response and other demographic consequences* [1978] 62).

4 Thucydides 2.47 ff.; Diodorus 14.70-71; Livy 41.21; Cyprian, *de mortalitate* 14. For a cross-section of Galen's descriptions of the Marcus plague in translation, see P. Moraux, *Souvenirs d'un medecin: Galien de Pergame* [1985] 126-30. The disease in Diodorus is interpreted as smallpox by R. J. Littman, *Mnemosyne* 37 (1984) 110-16. For the Thucydides plague, see n.9 below.

5 In Kuhn 10.360 for example ('the great plague — may it one day end!').

6 For references to specific non-fatal diseases, note however Polyb. 3.87 and Dion. Hal. 12.6.1.