

## Another Eye-witness to the Plague Described by Cyprian and Notes on the “Persecution of Decius”<sup>1</sup>

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In volume 28 (2015) of *JRA*, I published a study of the sources for the pandemic mortality event that struck the Roman Empire ca. AD 249-270.<sup>2</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 six contemporary testimonies and six other independent lines of transmission about the disease, untangling some two dozen sources of information down through the late Byzantine chronicles. The Plague of 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 much better-studied Antonine Plague of the late second century.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the evidence for the Plague of Cyprian is, collectively, quite compelling; the consistency of independent testimony adds credence to the claims of a major mortality event. Part of the novelty of my study rested in its claim to have gathered the ancient sources “comprehensively and collectively.” Such claims are happily precarious, and an electronic search of the *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts* recently uncovered yet another – seventh – contemporary witness to the pandemic.

The *De laude martyrii* (hereafter DLM) is a text that has descended to us in the corpus of Cyprian’s writings.<sup>4</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century its authenticity was disputed, and none since have believed that it was from the hand of the Carthaginian bishop; Harnack argued that its author was the Roman schismatic Novatian, but this thesis failed to convince the field.<sup>5</sup> Recent work by Laetitia Ciccolini, including a forthcoming critical edition in the *Corpus Christianorum*, has advanced our knowledge of the setting, text, and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my deep gratitude to Laetitia Ciccolini for her generosity in sharing her forthcoming work and to Christopher Jones, Glen Bowersock, and Michael McCormick for kindly reading a draft of this note; errors of course remain my own.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Harper, “Pandemics and Passages to Late Antiquity: Rethinking the Plague of c. 249-70 described by Cyprian,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 28 (2015) 223-60.

<sup>3</sup> R. P. Duncan-Jones, “The Impact of the Antonine Plague,” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 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.

<sup>4</sup> A new edition is forthcoming from Laetitia Ciccolini in the *Corpus Christianorum*. The old text is published as G. Hartel, *Thasci Caecili Cypriani Opera omnia*, v. 3 (Vienna, 1871) 26-52.

<sup>5</sup> A. Harnack, *Eine bisher nicht erkannte Schrift Novatian’s vom Jahre 249/50* (‘Cyprian’, *De laude martyrii*) (TU, 13, 4b) (Leipzig, 1895). For a complete discussion, see the Introduction of Ciccolini’s new edition.

transmission of the work.<sup>6</sup> The DLM is certainly the work of a North African Christian contemporary with the Plague of Cyprian, written probably ca. 252-3 and probably in the orbit of the great Carthaginian cleric himself. Although its author remains anonymous, it is thus almost precisely contemporary with the *De mortalitate* and *Ad Demetrianum* of Cyprian, written against the backdrop of both the pandemic and the persecutions of this period. The text is a panegyric in praise of martyrdom and an encouragement to the faithful. Here is the text of the relevant passages from Ciccolini's new edition, 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 populatarum urbium intuemur? Vnde possumus agnoscere quanta martyrii habenda sit dignitas, ad cuius gloriam nos cogere etiam lues coepit.

14.1 Atque ut transeam cuncta, meminisse debemus quanta sit gloria ad Christum immaculatum uenire, consortem passionis existere perpetuaque cum Domino aeternitate regnare, carere exitiis imminentibus saeculi nec inter cruentam morborum populantium stragem communi cum ceteris sortem misceri.<sup>7</sup>

Or do we not see the rites of death every day? Are we not witnessing strange forms of dying? Do we not behold disasters from some previously unknown kind of plague brought on by furious and prolonged diseases? And the massacre of wasted cities? Whence we can recognize what great dignity there is in martyrdom, to whose glory even the pestilence is beginning to compel us.

And so that we may pass over all the rest, let us recall how great a glory it is to come to Christ without stain, to be a colleague in his passion, to reign in all eternity with the Lord, to be absent from the looming destruction of this age, and not to share the common fate of others amidst the bloody destruction of ravaging diseases.

The overwrought rhetoric of the DLM has won it few admirers. Nonetheless, it provides additional confirmation for the scale and significance of the pestilence in the 250s. Most striking is the author's insistence on the unprecedented nature of the mortality (*novos exitus, inexpertae cladis*). Inhabitants of the Roman Empire were accustomed to epidemics. Moreover, ancient conceptions of disease and humoral imbalance blocked any sense of pathogenic etiology; obviously, the author of the DLM is not suggesting a new infectious agent.<sup>8</sup> Rather, he is sketching a picture of a disease outbreak with

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<sup>6</sup> Also L. Ciccolini, *L'héritage littéraire de Cyprien de Carthage à travers les écrits pseudépigraphes* (Thèse de doctorat: Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007); C. Dell'Osso, *Trattati* (Rome, 2013) 9-39; A. Hayden, *De laude martyrii: A Translation with Introduction* (MA Thesis: Catholic University of America, 1955).

<sup>7</sup> The manuscripts give various readings of *cruentam stragem* which do not alter the general meaning, but here we opt for a correct and sensible reading; see Ciccolini's edition for a more detailed treatment.

<sup>8</sup> On these limits, see V. Nutton, "The Seeds of Disease: An Explanation of Contagion and Infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance," *Medical History* 27 (1983) 1-34; V. Boudon,

unfamiliar clinical presentation and exceptional severity. The DLM also reveals an awareness of the disease's wide scope: the mortality was wasting cities, plural. These claims cohere with the thrust of Cyprian's *De mortalitate*, which provides evocative description of the disease's symptoms and broad impact. Yet the author of the DLM is certainly no slave to Cyprian's model. Cyprian's text places far more emphasis on the dignity of ordinary death, while the DLM is focused exclusively on the glory of martyrdom.<sup>9</sup>

We can wonder if the image of "bloody destruction" caused by the disease is more than excited rhetoric. The phrase has precedent only in Lucan (who uses the construction twice).<sup>10</sup> But Cyprian's *De mortalitate* prominently describes hemorrhaging in the eyes, throat, and bowels. I cannot find *cruentus* used elsewhere in ancient Latin to modify a disease or plague. It may well be that the DLM too testifies to the unsettling experience of a pandemic disease with hemorrhagic presentation. Although this is stretching the evidence of the DLM to its limits (if not beyond), both the author's insistence of the novelty of this disease and the suggestion of bleeding as a symptom militate against identification of the Plague of Cyprian as a relapse of smallpox, the probable culprit of the Antonine Plague. In the original study, I made a case, avowedly speculative, for the possibility of a viral hemorrhagic fever of exotic origins. The new evidence is consistent with that hypothesis.

The author of the DLM makes extensive use of a metaphor that is familiar from Cyprian and integral to religious polemics in the middle of the third century: the *senectus mundi*.<sup>11</sup> The idea that the calamities of the age – especially drought and plague – were caused by the exhaustion of the world provided Christians with a response to pagans who blamed the adherents of the new cult for the wrath of the gods. The prominence of this apologetic argument in both Cyprian's corpus and the DLM suggests a connection that was not drawn in my original study but which might be briefly stated here: the close relationship between plague and the so-called "persecution." It seems that most scholars are convinced that the order of Decius to sacrifice was not conceived as an anti-Christian measure nor particularly aimed at Christians.<sup>12</sup> In short, it was not a persecution. It was still, however, novel, in

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"Galien face à la 'peste antonine' ou comment penser l'invisible," in S. Bazin-Tacchella, D. Quéruel, É. Samama, eds., *Air, miasmes et contagion: les épidémies dans l'Antiquité et au Moyen Age* (Langres, 2001) 29-54.

<sup>9</sup> See esp. Cyprian, *De mortalitate*, 14-15. P. Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015) 4-8.

<sup>10</sup> Lucan, *Bell. Civ.* 2.212 and 4.568.

<sup>11</sup> See J.-C. Fredouille, *Cyprien de Carthage: A Démétrien*, SC 467 (Paris, 2003) 21-38; E. Zocca, "La 'senectus mundi'. Significato, fonti, e fortuna di un tema ciprianeo," *Augustinianum* 35 (1995) 641-677.

<sup>12</sup> From a wide literature, see R. Selinger, *The Mid-third Century Persecutions of Decius and Valerian* (Frankfurt, 2002); C. Ando, *Imperial Rome AD 193 to 284: The Critical Century* (Edinburgh 2012) 134-41. For a different view, see J. B. Rives, "The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999) 135-54.

its scope and enforcement, which went well beyond conventional offers of sacrifice upon imperial accession. In short, the *phenomenon* remains, but what was long considered the *cause* has been removed, and we still need an explanation for *why* Decius and his successors sought to enforce a universal sacrifice.

The pandemic can be considered at least a partial impetus.<sup>13</sup> It need not have triggered the initial order to sacrifice, although it is chronologically possible. The disease was raging in Alexandria at least by the middle of 249, and the order to sacrifice was issued later in the year in Rome, where news of the impending mortality could have traveled. Regardless, it is more likely that the pandemic contributed to the continuing mood of alarm that resulted in further orders to sacrifice. As Cyprian's letter 59 of AD 252 shows, and the DLM would seem to confirm, edicts ordering sacrifice continued into the 250s.<sup>14</sup> There are two independent pieces of evidence suggesting a connection between the mortality and the religious response of the emperors. The first is from the *Historia Augusta*. The period from 244-260 in the *Historia Augusta* has been lost, if it ever existed, so it lacks coverage of the reign of Decius; but around 262, it reports, "The pax deorum was sought by inspection of the Sibylline books, and a sacrifice was made to *Jupiter Salutaris* as they had commanded. For such a great plague arose in both Rome and the cities of Greece that in one day five thousand people died of the same disease." This passage descends probably from Dexippus, a good contemporary source.<sup>15</sup> Second, there is the coinage with the image of Apollo Salutaris on the reverse. This theme in the coinage is not attested until 251, in the reign of Trebonius Gallus; it is well attested for several years thereafter, under Volusianus, Aemilianus, and Valerian.<sup>16</sup> This appearance of this coin type under Trebonius Gallus was a novelty. It is easy to associate the new invocations to Apollo the healer with the outbreak of the plague.<sup>17</sup> It is a plausible inference to see these coin types reflecting an imperially-sponsored act of universal sacrifice. We should call attention to the extreme activity of the religion of Apollo – including orders to sacrifice – in the course of the Antonine Plague.<sup>18</sup> Finally, it might be noted that we have evidence from

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<sup>13</sup> It might also be added that the climatic conditions of the 240s were exceptionally unstable and poor. See K. Harper, "The Environmental Fall of the Roman Empire," *Daedalus* 145 (2) (2016) forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> Cypr., *Ep.* 59.6 (ed. G. Hartel, CSEL 3.2, Vienna, 1871), esp. with G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage* vol. 3 (New York, 1986) 246.

<sup>15</sup> See Harper, "Pandemics and Passages," 235.

<sup>16</sup> RIC IV.3: Trebonius Gallus, nos. 5, 19, 32, 103, 104a-b; RIC IV.3 Volusianus, nos. 188, 247, 248a-b; RIC IV.3 Aemilianus, no. 27; RIC V.1, Valerianus, no. 76.

<sup>17</sup> See Clarke, *The Letters*, 246, for other instances of orders to sacrifice amidst epidemics.

<sup>18</sup> The evidence is of two kinds. First, a series of brief inscriptions invoking "the gods and goddesses" and convincingly associated with plague by C.P. Jones, "Ten dedications 'To the gods and goddesses' and the Antonine Plague," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 18 (2005) 293–301. Second, a series of plague-oracles issued from Claros, on which see recently C. Oesterheld, *Göttliche Botschaften für zweifelnde Menschen: Pragmatik und*

Porphry directly blaming Christian refusal to respect the gods for the mortality crises of the age.<sup>19</sup> In short, the polemics of the DLM fit into a broader picture in which the pandemic was deeply implicated in the religious turmoil of the period. On this interpretation, the empire-wide disease event went hand-in-hand with the empire-wide enforcement of sacrifice.

It is to be hoped that greater interest in the Plague of Cyprian might bring to light still more clues hidden out of plain sight and that our understanding of this critical episode in the life of the Roman Empire will continue to grow.

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*Orientierungsleistung der Apollon-Orakel von Klaros und Didyma in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit* (Göttingen, 2008). I cannot resist mentioning that nothing would preclude a third-century dating for either class of evidence, but I have been unable to find any definite reasons for associating the inscriptions with the Plague of Cyprian, and the association with the Antonine Plague remains most likely.

<sup>19</sup> Apud Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 5.1.9.