

Justinian's Plague: The Birth of Modern Europe?

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1. Thesis

Just prior to the middle of the sixth century, the Byzantine Empire was enjoying a veritable Golden Age. Justinian I had become emperor in 527, and during his reign had rapidly re-claimed much territory for the empire. In general, the population was booming and in good spirits, there was plenty of money and great strength in the armed forces. It seemed as though the Empire would live on forever. Suddenly, in 542, there was an outbreak of bubonic plague in Byzantium that lasted about three years. It is estimated that the empire lost 40-50% of its population to the plague over the three year period, or as much as 400,000 people. The plague had a deadening effect on the Byzantine Empire, and in the years following the outbreak it slipped into a great depression. This was a key turning point in Mediterranean history; a shift from the multinational imperium of late Antiquity to a more regionalized group of nation states each with its own individual culture and language, characteristic of Medieval Europe. Is it possible that the outbreak of bubonic plague in sixth century Byzantium was the most important contributing force to this shift? Would the the Empire as it was at its height have succeeded had the plague not occurred?

2. Sources/Limitations of Study

a. Primary and secondary

The primary sources consulted for this report are pictures and maps obtained from various secondary sources. There are representations of those affected by the outbreak; some suggest the extent of the suffering caused by it, but none really support or refute the idea that the plague was the primary contributing force in the shift from early to late Byzantium. There are maps that illustrate the differences in geographic boundaries of the empire from its height during the sixth century and its decline in the seventh century, but they don't indicate what factors effected this change. Overall, the primary sources available provide evidence that some sort of plague did in fact take place, but reveal little about its extent or effects.



Fig 1 Bubonic Plague. (Paranormalknowledge.com, 2009)

Secondary sources include books and research papers on Byzantine civilization and the Justinian plague. Most books on Byzantium as a whole mention the plague and briefly explain it as a historical event that took place, but fail to examine it as a contributing factor to the decline of the empire in the seventh century. Some historians refuse to recognize the contraction of Mediterranean cities as a result of depopulation by the plague because it happened at different times in different places. (Mango, 1980) Those articles and books written specifically about the plague itself examine and discuss the magnitude of its impact on the shift. They present some criticisms of the

idea of the plague as the most important contributing factor, but then go on to negate them. This creates a bit of bias in the information available, as those who feel it is not an important factor do not discuss it, and those reports that do find it to be an important factor are the only ones who discuss its relevance.



Fig 2 Byzantine citizens affected by the plague were covered with buboes, or painfully swollen lymph nodes. (“Life Support: The Blog”, 2009)

The biggest limitation of this study is that there are very few historical sources from after Justinian’s reign that document the ongoing changes within the empire. After the year 602 historical reports are almost obsolete. This could be a result of the loss of much of the literary, educated and clerical population during the initial and subsequent outbreaks of the plague. Most of the evidence of the ensuing collapse of Imperial cities is archaeological. (Mango, 1980)

b. Perspectives

Given the momentum in the Byzantine Empire under Justinian's reign in the years leading up to the outbreak of the plague, it is obvious that there had to be some major force or forces at play to bring about such a dramatic shift in prosperity and sudden decline of such a large, burgeoning imperial state. The coincident timing of the arrival of the plague in Byzantium and its abrupt fall from grace cannot be ignored. It is possible that other factors may have contributed to its sudden decline, but unlikely that any other had as immediate or extensive effect as the outbreak of plague and its ripple effects on the population, economy and strength of the armed forces.

c. Awareness of Perspectives Not Taken

There were some arguments presented as criticisms of the idea that the plague was the most important contributing factor to the decline of the Byzantine Empire. One alternative perspective was that Justinian was destined to fail and his empire decline because his plans for expansion were far too vast and impossible to maintain. (Sarris, 2002) It was deemed impossible to defend the empire from attack by enemies from both the east and the west. Also, due to its vastness, with the heart of the empire in Asia Minor, it was impossible to defend its territories in those areas that were far from the capital city, which resulted in the loss of Italy and the Danube lands. (Baynes, 1925) Another perspective was that imperial armies weren't strong enough to take and hold former territories and that it was only a matter of time before reclaimed lands were again lost. There is insufficient evidence of available resources and conditions of the Empire to fully explore these claims.

3. Argument / Discussion / Evidence

By the year 540, under Justinian I's reign, North Africa had been recaptured from the Vandals, much of Italy from the Ostrogoths and Spain from the Visigoths. The Byzantine army was strong, with an estimated manpower of 350,000 (Sarris, 2002) and enemies of the empire were weak and sparse. The strongest enemy was Persia, but in 532, after several wars, a peace treaty between the two, known as "Endless Peace" was signed. (Downey, 1960) By 540, Byzantium was one large Imperial superstate controlled from its capital, Constantinople, located at modern day Istanbul. The empire was prosperous and the population was increasing in all areas: Spain, Greece, the Balkans, Asia Minor, Egypt and North Africa. (Sarris, 2002) As a result of the booming population, government finances were healthy and Justinian headed an aggressive building initiative, constructing churches, bridges and fortifications. (Sarris, 2002) It seemed as though the Empire would live on forever and there "seemed to be no evidence of poor conditions just before the plague in the heart of the Empire." (Sarris, 2002) It would have been highly coincidental that the Empire should begin to decline at



exactly the same time that the plague hit if there was not a cause and effect relationship.

Fig 3 Byzantium in the time of Justinian (Mosiaccmatters.co.uk, 2004)

In 541, the outbreak of the plague started in Egypt, spread throughout the Mediterranean, and reached as far west as Ireland and east to Mesopotamia. (Sarris, 2002) It was the first outbreak of its kind in recorded history, and was “by all accounts a disaster of unprecedented magnitude”. (Mango, 1980) Subsequent outbreaks happened at regular intervals throughout the remainder of the sixth century. According to Procopius, a Byzantine scholar and historian, Constantinople suffered losses of up to 10,000 people a day when the outbreak was at its peak. (Sarris, 2002) He tells us that “nearly the whole human race was annihilated.” (Mango, 1980) There were so many corpses that tombs quickly filled up and there was neither the time nor the manpower to dig new ones. Therefore corpses were piled on the seashore or flung into the towers of Sycae. (Mango, 1980)



Fig 4 Plague of Justinian. From “The Top Ten Worst Plagues in History” (Listverse.com, 2009)

The outbreak of the plague had serious economic effects. All occupations were interrupted and therefore the prices of goods skyrocketed; farms were deserted and people were left starving. With a drastically reduced population, there was only about half the number of people paying taxes and the Imperial treasury suffered greatly. This was the main source of funding for the army, so armed forces were scaled back financially as well as in number, to 150,000 from the original 350,000. (Sarris, 2002) Its enemy territories had been less affected by the outbreak, which readjusted the balance of power among states and rendered the empire vulnerable. Justinian's offensive in the West was abandoned after 565 (Sarris, 2002), and in the seventh century, the empire was invaded by the Persians and then the Arabs. According to Mango, “one can hardly overestimate the catastrophic break that occurred in the seventh century.” (Mango, 1980) Some of the most prosperous areas of the empire (Syria, Palestine, Egypt and North Africa) were lost and thus the geographic size of the empire was also reduced to about half. (Mango, 1980)

The imperial cities of Antiquity within the Empire shrank and then practically disappeared, at different times in different places as they easily fell to foreign invasion. According to Mango (1980), the plagues of the sixth century were “a factor, perhaps the determining factor, in the collapse of urban life.” It is difficult to know for sure what other factors may have contributed to this collapse, because there are very few historical sources after the end of the sixth century. (Mango, 1980) This lack of historical evidence is perhaps because numbers in the clergy and more literate groups were seriously injured, and many of the contributors to art, architecture and higher thinking were lost. According to Russell, Hirst wrote “Doubtless, this calamity (the plague) played an important part in giving rise to the Dark Ages.” (Sarris, 2002) Russell noted that “with

regard to letters and art, the period from 610 to 717 is the darkest epoch in the entire history of the Empire.”

4. Relation/Significance for Contemporary Society

If the outbreak of the plague had not occurred, it is likely that the prosperity and growth of Justinian’s Empire would have continued. If the Persians and Arabs had not had the same opportunity to take back land and people, perhaps Islam would have far fewer followers and Christianity would be more prominent in parts of the world that are Islamic today. Modern Europe would potentially still be one large Imperial state, where every language is spoken and every culture is represented, rather than the group of individually governed nations that we see today. Perhaps the Dark Ages would not have come about if such large numbers of artists and literary thinkers had not been lost during the outbreak. Given the innumerable effects modern Europe has had on the history of the rest of the world, society as we know it in North America in particular, it is impossible to even attempt to imagine what the rest of the modern world would look like today if Europe had remained one large Imperial nation state. One could contemplate endlessly the possibilities of contributions that might have been made to art, religion, education and other areas of society had the population not been ravaged so extensively by the disease. With further research into the details of and other aspects of sixth century Byzantine society, perhaps one could gain insight into how those institutions might have evolved and thus shaped the rest of the modern world.

5. Conclusion

It seems impossible to ignore the impact of the Justinian plague on the reshaping of Europe from the multinational imperium of Late Antiquity to the modern regionalized group of nation states that emerged in Medieval times and continues today. It would have been highly coincidental that the Empire would enter a period of spontaneous decline that was totally unrelated to the outbreak. The plague’s sheer power changed

the social and demographic patterns of the entire continent. The outbreak of this disease was undoubtedly one of the most important contributing factors to one of the greatest shifts in history.

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