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Indirect Evidence for the Social Impact of the Justinianic Pandemic: Episcopal Burial and Conciliar Legislation in Visigothic Hispania

The Justinianic Plague, the first documented pandemic outbreak of the bubonic plague, struck the Mediterranean region in the 540s CE. Despite some surviving narrative accounts, however, there is little direct written evidence for its impact in much of the Mediterranean world. This is especially true for Visigothic Hispania. However, certain texts that are not explicit accounts of the plague may hint at its impact. One such text is the fourth canon of the Council of Valencia, held in 546. This canon reflects episcopal concerns about what to do when a bishop dies “a sudden death.” According to it, the bishop should not be buried at once but “placed with great care in a coffin apart from the others.” Comparative philology, the archaeology of sixth-century Valencia, and recent paleogenetic investigation into the bacterium that causes the disease all combine to suggest that within the broader context of episcopal funerary displays, the “sudden death” referred to is the plague and that the canon is a response to changes in burial customs—especially the newfound prevalence of mass inhumation—caused by the first wave of the pandemic.

Reconstructing Pandemics from Indirect Evidence

One difficulty with studying the Justinianic Pandemic, the successive waves of bubonic plague that began in the 540s CE, is that the surviving source

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base is so thin.¹ Those contemporary histories that do discuss the plague note the devastation that it caused, but given the overall paucity of sources from many of the regions the disease affected, we often have no texts that tell of its impact in a specific location. No written evidence testifies to the Justinianic Pandemic ever reaching Bavaria, and yet teams of scientists have found and identified ancient DNA of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes the bubonic plague, at two sixth-century burial sites in that region, Aschheim and Altenerding.² Moreover, even when written sources survive, they provide scant details. Only one author refers by name to the first wave of the Justinianic Pandemic in Visigothic Hispania (roughly modern Spain and Portugal). This unknown scribe scribbled a marginal notation in the continuation of the chronicle of Victor of Tunnuna: “In those days the bubonic plague (*inguinalis plaga*) ground down almost all of Hispania.”³ This enigmatic text, with its biblical language of grinding (*contrivit*) and evocation of the plague’s wide scope, suggests that the plague devastated the Visigothic kingdom.⁴ But it is the only text that explicitly mentions the first wave of the plague in Hispania.⁵ Moreover, unlike other parts of the Mediterranean world where historians of the time left detailed accounts of the reaction to the pandemic,

¹ Several attempts have been made to trace the path of this first bubonic plague pandemic. The basic chronology was established in Biraben and Le Goff 1975, 72–77, with revisions for much of the eastern Mediterranean in Stathakopoulos 2004, 277–93. For the scholarly debate over the impact of the plague on the transformation of the Roman world, see the discussion in Wickham 2005, 504–8, and the response in McCormick 2016, 1005–6. For a recent maximalist approach, see Harper 2017, esp. 199–245.

² For Aschheim, see Harbeck et al. 2013. Earlier studies of Aschheim, such as Wiechmann and Grupe 2005, did not provide robust evidence. For Altenerding, see Feldman et al. 2016.

³ Vict. Tunn. *Chron.* 130b (CCSL 173A: 44): *His diebus inguinalis plaga totam pene contrivit Hispaniam*. The notations, known as the Consular Annals of Saragossa (*Consularia Caesaraugustana*), are found in the margins of John of Biclar’s continuation of Victor’s *Chronicon*. See Cardelle de Hartmann and Collins 2001, 7–11, for details on their transmission. For an analysis of this problematic text, especially the date meant by *his diebus*, see Kulikowski 2007, 150–51 nn. 3–5, who assesses arguments that the year referred to is either 542 or 543 and concludes that there is insufficient evidence to determine when the plague arrived in Hispania.

⁴ For the biblical resonances of this phrasing in the *Vetus Latina Hispana*, see, among others, Ps 3.8 (ed. Ayuso Marazuela 1962a, 382–83): [*Domine*] *dentes peccatorum contrivisti*; Ps 104.33, (ed. Ayuso Marazuela 1962b, 902–03): *Et percussit vineas eorum et ficulneas eorum et contrivit omne lignum finium eorum*.

⁵ Several sources show the impact of the many later outbreaks of plague in the peninsula. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Councils of Toledo, held in 693 and 694, respectively, incidentally note the plague affecting certain regions of the kingdom. A series of four sermons on the plague form part of a collection of nineteen previously unedited sermons published in Grégoire 1966, 214–22. They survive in the “Toledo Homiliary,” London British Library Add. 30.853 (formerly Silos, 10), a late tenth- or early eleventh-century copy of what appears to be a seventh-century liturgical collection. These sermons are briefly analyzed by Kulikowski 2007, 155–56, who argues that their inclusion in a homiliary shows that they represent a later outbreak of plague, which had already become endemic in the peninsula.