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
base is so thin.\textsuperscript{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 Justini-anic Pandemic ever reaching Bavaria, and yet teams of scientists have found and identified ancient DNA of \textit{Yersinia pestis}, the bacterium that causes the bubonic plague, at two sixth-century burial sites in that region, Aschheim and Altenerding.\textsuperscript{2} Moreover, even when written sources survive, they provide scant details. Only one author refers by name to the first wave of the Justini-anic 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 (\textit{inguinalis plaga}) ground down almost all of Hispania.”\textsuperscript{3} This enigmatic text, with its biblical language of grinding (\textit{contrivit}) and evocation of the plague’s wide scope, suggests that the plague devastated the Visigothic kingdom.\textsuperscript{4} But it is the only text that explicitly mentions the first wave of the plague in His-pania.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, unlike other parts of the Mediterranean world where historians of the time left detailed accounts of the reaction to the pandemic,