

Skepticism in Belief: Pandemics, Procopius, and Political Schism

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Abstract

When the world shut down due to an ‘unknown’ pandemic in March 2020, it was not the first-time society has been affected by spreading global disease, which further spread collective and individual dis-ease. It often seems that as much as things change, the more they stay the same. Uncertainty breeds fear, and so too does isolation—always has. Fear revels in what is unknown, resulting in belief structures being questioned, built up, and/or torn down. Let’s go back then to late Roman antiquity, when the rest of the world was further away, both physically and mentally, and attempt to unpack today’s plague alongside the fifteen century’s old Justinian Plague. We have descriptions of social, cultural, and physical realities associated with the devastating 6th c. plague. Procopius, in particular, has works extant that reference Justinian’s Plague and some trends appear strikingly familiar when revisited 15 months and/or 15 centuries later. Skepticism, made glaring in the face of disease, can pave the way for alternate belief systems to solidify and take root when political schism is actively at work among the masses in various ways. For example, political trends in military and travel a century following the fall of Rome in 410 and the increasing solidification of Christianity through 4th /5th /6th c. CE.

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When the world shut down due to an ‘unknown’ pandemic in March 2020, it was not the first-time society has been affected by a global disease, which spread collective and individual dis-ease. It often seems as much as things change, the more they stay the same. Fear revels in what is unknown, resulting in belief structures being questioned. If we go back now to Roman antiquity, when the rest of the world was further away, both physically and mentally, we can attempt to unpack our

current plague pandemic alongside the fifteen century's old Justinian Plague—or, the First Plague Pandemic. We have descriptions of social, cultural, and physical realities associated with these devastating 6th c. plague. Procopius, has 2 extant works that reference the Justinian Plague and some trends appear strikingly familiar when revisited 15 centuries later.

As we know, our current plague – COVID 19 – is a type of coronavirus that has been spreading (and mutating) worldwide since December 2019. The virus spreads on the breeze so to say, and ways to reducing transmission include, social distancing, masking, and washing hands. Symptoms of infection are variable, which combined with a lengthy incubation period and insufficient global vaccination rates, continue to propel the spread of COVID 19 worldwide. Of course, this is the first time that *WE* (like, you and me) have been affected by this kind of world-disrupting pandemic, but it is certainly not the first-time humanity has experienced a catastrophic plague. Probably, the most well-known is the Black Death of the Middle Ages.

The Black Death (also known as the Second Plague Pandemic) began in the mid 1340s, but experienced regional recurrences well into the early 19th century. Spreading through Asia, Europe, and Africa, the First Plague Pandemic may have killed an estimated 50 million people—perhaps, 50% of the population of Europe at the time. Also known as the Bubonic Plague, it is one of three plagues caused by the bacteria, *yersinia pestis*, and is mainly carried by infected fleas. The Plague spread through rat to rat, rat to human, and human to human contact on ships (and beyond). Today anti-biotic treatment is over 90% effective in treating the bubonic plague, however there are *still* cases that result in death every year. COVID 19 is different than these historical plague pandemics in several ways—for example, a virus is not bacteria—but, it is proving similar in that it is affecting global (and regional) economies, politics, and culture. Skepticism in belief seems to be a common side effect, regardless of time or place affected by plague—15 months ago or 15 centuries ago.

Nearly 1500 years ago, the Justinian Plague broke out in 541/2 CE and was the historical debut of the bubonic plague. Also known as the First Plague Pandemic, outbreaks are thought to

have recurred for over 200 years into the 750s. Skepticism exacerbates schism – so, let’s establish a few contexts and dynamics that surrounded the First Plague Pandemic of the 6th century. First of all, after an arguable dominance in the Mediterranean lasting over 750 years, Rome had been sacked just over 100 years prior, c.410 CE, and the western provinces had also been lost to foreign pressures and various groups coming into Europe from the east. People moving through and across the Steppes from east to west and back again, after the fall of the western Roman empire likely played a role in spreading the plague into, and across, Asia, the rest of Europe, and the Mediterranean.

Remembered as a despot, Justinian I reigned over the Eastern Roman Empire for almost 40 years in the 6th century. His reign was marked by *renovatio imperii* (or, ‘restoration of the empire’). Justinian’s ‘restoration of the empire’ meant (among other things) attempting to regain Rome’s former territories in the west that had been lost to the Goths, Huns and various Germanic groups from Africa through continental Europe to the UK. Restoring the Western Roman Empire meant that there was a lot of military campaigning under Justinian.

Economically, the east prospered over the lost, and now-foreign-run west. Trade increased under Justinian, which (in plague terms) meant there were more boats (which meant more rats/flea-spread). Agriculture flourished, even through the major Plague outbreaks of 541/42 CE—however, there was widespread famine across the Empire seven years following. There were also labor shortages post-plague. Regardless, Justinian engaged in massive building programs before, during, and following the Great Plague of 542 CE (to 558 CE in *The Buildings of Justinian*, Procopius).

Chronologically-speaking, this is the beginning of what is commonly referred to as “The Dark Age” in standard European history. Less stable realities after the fall of Rome simply demanded wealth, art, knowledge, and skills become increasingly ‘moveable’ for a time. Reform legislation with respect to religious matters was dynamic from the 4th to 8th centuries CE, and a series of councils and synods resulted in the consolidation (and subsequent reorganisation) of

Christianity across what we know today as Europe, and across the world. What is remembered as ‘worldwide ’after the fact largely depends on who is telling the story and why they are telling it.

Enter Procopius of Caesarea, born in Palestine in the late-5th century. Trained as a lawyer, Procopius moved to Constantinople in 527 CE, the same year that Justinian I became emperor and that Belisarius became his (Justinian’s) No. 1 General. Procopius was appointed legal advisor and private secretary to Belisarius; tasked to keep notes, he published several works from the period that remain extant today. Two very different histories that both discuss the First Plague Pandemic—one is straight-up, military chronicling (*History of the Wars*) and the other is sensational, gossip reporting (*Anecdota*, or *Secret History*)—are the focus here, and shed light on aspects of our Current Plague Pandemic too.

Several descriptions of plague exist from antiquity and often they come to us contained in military chronicles (i.e., Thucydides; Ammianus Marcellinus). Procopius chronicles the campaigns of emperor Justinian’s General Belisarius through Italy, Africa, and Persia in eight books, spanning from 527 to 550 CE. Of particular interest to us today is Book II, Chapters 22 and 23. Procopius opens Book 22 with the Plague and is explicit about its far-reaching impacts; “During these times there was a pestilence, by which the whole human race came near to being annihilated” (*History II: xxii:1*).

The sickness itself is described by Procopius in detail: from its onset, to symptoms, to eventual death (*History II: xxii:18-39*). Within a week of exposure to the bacteria, flu-like symptoms would appear. Then onset of bubonic swelling in the lymph nodes at the groin, armpits, temples (*History II: xxii.17*). These were often accompanied by vomiting, delirium, or coma (*History II: xxii.19*). Procopius goes on to tell us:

Death came in some cases immediately, in others after many days; and with some the body broke out with black pustules about as large as a lentil and these did not survive even one day, but all succumbed immediately (*History II: xxii:30*)

Procopius also describes how the First Plague Pandemic spread from the sea ports into the nearby city; then, outward into the fields beyond. Knowing what we know from 15 centuries of hindsight, it makes perfect sense since we know from the Second Plague Pandemic of the 14th century that the bacteria spread mainly by way of the infected fleas on the rats that were transported on boats. Procopius tells us how; “And this disease always took its start from the coast, and from there went up to the interior” (History II: xxii:9).

In its second year, the Plague made its way to Byzantium—which is where Procopius himself was exposed to it, so it makes sense that his history is focused on the effects of the plague specifically. Justinian I, also caught the Plague in Byzantium (History II: xxiii:20). Both men survived. As both men would have had the resources to receive timely treatment (which, much like we see in our current plague pandemic, would not be the universal case for everyone). Over the worst four months of the initial outbreak death rates exploded to over 10,000/day (History, II: xxiii:1-5). These numbers are likely exaggerated in Procopius’s account, but it is not out of line to believe that mass graves were overflowing (History, II: xxiii:6-10) or that no proper funeral rites could be conducted (History, II: xxiii:8-15). All this sounds way too familiar over these many months of COVID restrictions affecting how communities and individual mourn their dead worldwide.

Such was the course of the pestilence in the Roman empire at large as well as in Byzantium. And it fell also upon the land of the Persians and visited all the other foreign lands besides. (History, II: xxiii:21)

Chronologically, Procopius wrote his *Anecdota* or *Secret History* just following his *History of the Wars* (c.550), but it wouldn’t be published until after the deaths of both Justinian and his wife Theodora (so, post-568). The *Anecdota* is quite different from Procopius’s military chronicles that were published while the emperor Justinian was still alive—this is reflected in content and tone. *Anecdota* (or, *Secret History*) is a history of what Procopius presents as the intrigue-laden, 6th century imperial court of Justinian and Theodora. It was a deliberate attempt to discredit and show

them both as greedy and base, which was not totally out of line perhaps? Depending on one's philosophical leanings. Regardless, Procopius juxtaposes a depraved emperor at court against his triumphant general, Belisarius, who was represented by his chronicler as winning myriads of triumphs on battlefields abroad. To a certain extent, propaganda at its finest.

In Book 18 of the *Anecdota*, Procopius estimates that upwards of 50% of the population that survived his expansionist wars would be later lost to the Plague. He blames the deaths on Justinian as he recounts all the "lives destroyed" by the "demon" emperor in his *Anecdota* (cf. *Anecdota*, xviii.1).

Such, then, were the calamities which fell upon mankind during the reign of the demon who had become incarnate in Justinian, while he himself as having become emperor, provided the causes of them (Anecdota, xviii:45).

Let's just say, this is a very different presentation of the emperor than what appears in Procopius's other works, *The Buildings of Justinian* and *History of the Wars*.

Regardless though, how similar to COVID 19 (c.2021) are these earlier broad ranging effects/affects of the bubonic plague on society, politics, the economy, and culture?

Military campaigning was the main reason people moved from one place to another in the ancient world (other included, for example, occupational reasons—politicians, merchants, and entertainers). Today though, people mostly travel 'just because '(and, still, of course, for occupational reasons—politicians, merchants, and entertainers). Regardless of why people are travelling, this is a major spreader in *all* plague pandemic situations. Reminiscent of how Procopius talks about the spread of the First Plague Pandemic from the coast to the interior, spreading out from points of contact—from port cities, if you will (*History*, II: xxii:9).

As time wears on in this, our current, interminable plague, there is more and more regional variance. This was also the case during the plague pandemics of the 6th and 14th centuries CE. As some responses become more localised, others become increasingly global in their reach. COVID 19 has certainly influenced some trends that were already emerging pre-COVID, like on-line

commerce. Other things are increasingly taking an online form too: like, education. For example, opportunities like the hybrid 21st International MELOW conference at Shoolini University in November 2021.

The twenty-four-hour news cycle and the internet are major differences between then and now that further contribute to skepticism in belief by way of social media and the constant availability of pretty much everything. The world is constantly scrolling through legitimate information and ‘fake news’ alongside their friends photographs and tabloid gossip. The internet is being mobilised as a real tool in social engagement in many ways these days, for better or worse. When speaking about the popularity of conspiracy theories in the 21st century, especially during COVID; it seems this has been the case for the past 15 centuries too.

For they love to conjure up causes which are absolutely incomprehensible to man, and to fabricate outlandish theories of natural philosophy, knowing well that they are saying nothing sound (History, II: xxii. 1)

Conspiracy theory culture existed in antiquity, and academic skepticism among the masses is acknowledged by Procopius (History, II: xxii:1), suggesting that it was just as prominent in the ancient world, as it is today. Distrust of ‘the facts’ is nothing new.

Skepticism comes in many forms and can be made glaring in the face of disease. This can pave the way for alternate belief systems to solidify and take root when political schism is actively at work among the masses in various ways. History reminds us that adaptation to a Plague is so often reactionary and very seldom seamless. This is perhaps hardest to see when we are currently in the seam of our own plague pandemic. We know Procopius caught the Plague and survived, literally *and* literarily. How word gets around is very different today than it was 50 years ago, let alone 1500 years ago. Then, it was Procopius’s *Anecdota* and the tavern; and now, it’s (still) tell-all books and (still) word of mouth—only on the internet instead of in-person.

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