

North African Way of Approaching to Medical Healing and the 'Plague of Cyprian'

Naoki KAMIMURA
(Tokyo)

The plague of the mid-third century in the circum-Mediterranean region was named after a bishop of Carthage, Thascius Caecilianus Cyprianus because his writings supply some of the most reliable accounts about the epidemic. He is also the only author to describe its symptoms. Some scholars have attempted to identify it with measles, but the evidence is limited.¹ There is little evidence for the so-called 'Plague of Cyprian' outside the treatises of Cyprian, except two letters of Dionysius of Alexandria preserved in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius and Pontius's biography of Cyprian, *Vita Cypriani*. In particular, Cyprian's *De mortalitate* and *Ad Demetrianum* were written during the ravages of the plague and offered advice to his fellows on how to proceed. In this paper, I shall draw out how the concern for the aspects of the human condition and the care for the sick were expressed during the spread of a horrific plague, thereby providing further texture to Cyprian's understanding of the role of medico-religious conception.

The evidence for the 'Plague of Cyprian'

To begin with the testimony of the 'Plague of Cyprian', it must be remembered that there are different kinds of evidence for the plague, that is, the numismatic, archaeological, and literary sources attesting an outbreak of the disease in the middle of the third century. While the written evidence must be convincing in its details, it is inappropriate to dismiss both numismatic and archaeological testimonies to examine the nature and impact of this pandemic.

1 See Harper 2015; Harper 2016; Kearns 2018.

Imperial coinage reflects the military and political activities in the part of communities, cities and empires, as well as historical events and the identity among the groups in antiquity.² For example, coins often showed the emperor as *sacerdos*, a priest who conducted sacrifice on Roman public monuments. He was mentioned as the highest ‘religious authority’ who played a leading role in sacrificial scenes. While the coinage of this type was common in the first half of the third century, the image of Apollo was popular throughout the third century.³ Apollo was a sun god, as well as god of learning and the arts, divination, agriculture and healing.⁴ Among his various functions on coinage, it is noteworthy that Apollo as the healer on the coins of four emperors—Trebonianus Gallus (r. 251–53), Volusianus (251–53), Aemilianus (253) and Valerian (253–60)—is regarded as a reaction to the plague in the 250s and 260s. In particular, in the second half of AD 251, the legend *APOLL SALVTARI* appeared on the coins of Trebonianus Gallus, which can be thought to be the earliest evidence for the outbreak of the plague in Rome.⁵

There are several archaeological finds that would be connected with the ‘Plague of Cyprian’. Of these evidences, there is a remarkable, ongoing case that is being reported from Thebes in Egypt.⁶ A team of archaeologists has excavated the funerary complexes of Harwa and Skhimenru, found a mass grave and associated the find with the Cyprian Plague. A review of the ceramic evidence, including potteries and oil-lamps, suggests that this burial site is dated to the middle of the third century. The particular interest is that the graves with human bodies were covered in lime. There also found the kilns next to the graves, where the lime was made to complete the body disposal operation.⁷ Accordingly, the report offers the possibility of the extraordinary power of a disease and its tragic consequences. Another mass burials recently found at the catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus in Rome would be thought to have a connection with this plague. The burial remains, and its arrangement shows that at least 1,300 individuals were hastily interred, and reflects unusual circumstances. This site has been dated to the second or third century, thus possibly connected with the Antonine plague (166–90). But coins of Severus Alexander (r. 222–35) and Gordian I (238) were found near one of the largest deposits of bodies in

2 Williams and Meadows 2010: 176; Kearns 2018: 23.

3 Manders 2012: 131–32.

4 Byrne 2008: 595; Harper 2015: 225.

5 *The Roman Imperial Coinage* 4.3, 154; Harper 2015: 225. See also Kearns 2018: 23–25.

6 Harper 2015: 226; Kearns 2018: 27. See also Tiradritti 2014.

7 See Jarus 2014.

the complex.⁸ If these coins provide a *terminus post quem* date for this site, it is more likely that there exists a connection with the 'Plague of Cyprian'.

Along with the numismatic and archaeological evidence, the contemporary literary sources of the third century stand as clearly the chief witnesses which become indispensable in discussions of the plague. Before shifting focus to the treatises of Cyprian, the summary of literary witnesses, including these African writings, is shown.

There are seven contemporary sources of the events. Indeed its quality and significance vary widely. The list is as follows:

1. Dionysius of Alexandria
2. Cyprian of Carthage
3. Pontius of Carthage
4. *De laude martyrii*
5. 13th Sibylline Oracle
6. Dexippus
7. Philostratus

The earliest testimony is preserved in two letters written by Dionysius of Alexandria, which now survive in the book 7 of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. Dionysius was born in the 190s, lived in Alexandria for most of his life, became a bishop in 247/8 and died in 264/5.⁹ The first mention to the plague appeared in a letter, dated to the spring of 249 and addressed to Hierax, a bishop in Egypt. While the letter pays attention to the conflict that occurred between two groups in the church of Alexandria, it also describes a drought followed by a flood of the Nile and the 'continuous pestilence' that had seriously damaged 'this great city'.¹⁰ Thus, as is shown by the fact that the plague arrived in Rome in early 251, this report allows us to determine the beginning of the plague to 249 and its moving from East to West. It is important to note that his letter evaluates a severe impact of the disease on the population of the city.¹¹

[T]his great city no longer contains within itself so great a multitude of inhabitants, from tender infants up to those of extreme old age, as it used to support those whom it called hearty old men. But those from forty years of age to seventy were so much more numerous at that time that their

8 Harper 2015: 226 n. 20.

9 Strobel 1993.

10 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.21; FC 29, 123.

11 Parkin 1992: 63–64.

number is not to be matched today, even when those of fourteen to eighty years have been registered and reckoned together for the public allowance of food; and the youngest in appearance have become, as it were, of equal age with the oldest of long ago.¹²

Because of its age bracket and the reference to the ‘public allowance of food’, the description of its demographic change seems to add credibility to the account of Dionysius. His next letter was addressed to the Christian church and composed as a letter for Easter in 250.¹³ The emphasis is placed on a narrative in which Dionysius praised the Christians for willingly helping the burial of the dead, by putting themselves in danger of being exposed to the disease.¹⁴ He contrasted the different responses of pagans and Christians to the distressing fear of the epidemic. In the face of the breakdown of social order and the ensuing chaos, he was writing a festal letter for the encouragement of Christians in Alexandria.

These earliest witnesses bear comparison with the mention of the plague found in the writings of Cyprian. He was a pagan convert and, after elected bishop of Carthage in 248/9, served for the Christian community until his martyrdom in 258.¹⁵ Two of his extant twelve treatises are connected with the outbreak of plague around 252.¹⁶ *To Demetrian* addresses a local pagan on the reason of the occurrence of human suffering, that is, drought, war, famine and plague. *On Mortality* is a work of exhortation delivered as a sermon to a Christian audience, trying to defend their faith in response to the fear of the epidemic. This sermon was composed around 252, not long after its outbreak in North Africa.¹⁷ These references to the plague will be considered further in the next section of this paper.

Pontius, a deacon of Cyprian, composed his biography sometime soon after his death in 258.¹⁸ While he did not describe the plague in detail, he spoke of the disorder of social life and a huge number of dead bodies in Carthage. Furthermore, as well as Dionysius of Alexandria, Pontius praised how the Christians behaved and in particular the charitable behaviour in burying the dead in the midst of the

12 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.21; FC 29, 123.

13 Scheidel 1996: 222–38.

14 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7.22; FC 29, 123–26.

15 Burns 2002.

16 Burns 2009: 471.

17 Sage 1975: 381 and Strobel 1993: 167.

18 See Jerome, *De uiris illustribus* 68; Harper 2015: 229–30.

plague.¹⁹ Another Christian source is the *De laude martyrii* which had been accepted into the corpus of Cyprian until the 19th century. Recent scholarship has shown that, although its author remains anonymous, it is the work of a North African Christian contemporary with the plague, thus supposed to be written around 252–253. The author was concerned with an encouragement to the faithful in the Carthaginian Christians, and exclusively the glory of martyrdom.²⁰

The other contemporary sources were pagan. The *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, authored by a member of the Syrian upper class,²¹ referred to the actual occurrence of disastrous epidemic in the third century. The oracle in question was composed around 253 and compiled around 260.²² Two pagan witnesses come from Athenian historians: Dexippus (c. 210–73) and Philostratus (c. 170/72–247/50). Although their own accounts do not survive, it is possible to identify them as the chief sources for the later historical narrative of the plague. For example, Paulus Orosius (fl. 414–17), a Spanish presbyter and disciple of Augustine, could have access to the earlier source, perhaps that of Philostratus, when he constructed his *Historiae adversus paganos* in 416/7. The reports of the plague preserved in Zosimus's (early sixth c.) *Historia nova* derive not from a Greek translation of the lost *Kaisergeschichte* but the *Chronike Historia* of Dexippus.²³

Cyprian of Carthage and the plague

The plague was assigned to the reigns of Gallus and Volusianus (June 251–May 253) by ancient sources.²⁴ The plague appears to have reached Rome by the summer or autumn 251 and have beset Carthage not later than the summer of 252. It caused enormous damage and death. The city was filled with bodies of the dead and people were terrified with the spread of the disease.²⁵ In these circumstances, while the pagans avoided 'the deaths of the dying' and abandoned their dead,²⁶ the Christians were blamed by the pagans for the 'wars [...] the plague, famine [...] long

19 Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* 9; FC 15, 13–14.

20 Harper 2016: Brown 2015: 4–8.

21 Potter 1990: 141.

22 Potter 1990: 151.

23 Harper 2015: 235–36; Cameron 2011: 665–66.

24 Scourfield 1996: 23 n. 63.

25 Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* 9; FC 15, 13.

26 Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum* 10; FC 36, 176.

droughts'.²⁷ This was a typical pagan reaction.²⁸ Cyprian felt compelled to respond to the charge in an apologetic treatise addressed to a local pagan, Demetrianus, who was arousing hostility in the Carthaginian community. In *Ad Demetrianum*, Cyprian's response is mostly a kind of warning: claiming that the Christians should not be blamed for the calamity, and they will receive eternal salvation.²⁹ Although this work does not contribute to our understanding of the symptoms of the disease, it reports a distressing result of the plague: 'you accuse of the crime of plague and disease, although by plague itself and disease the crimes of individuals are either detected or increased, while mercy is not shown the weak and avarice and rapine await open-mouthed for the dead'.³⁰

The treatise *De mortalitate* is perhaps a sermon delivered to the whole of the Christian community in Carthage, in which Cyprian exhorted them to endure the ravages of the plague and, in particular, concerned about the 'undermining of religious convictions and appropriate Christian behaviour that the plague has caused'.³¹ Cyprian's discussion begins with the attitude of his audience to their death. His focus is placed on the epidemic's indiscriminate reach to Christians as well as pagans and Jews alike, the fact by which some Christians felt grave anxiety.³² He claims that, for the faithful, death should be a matter for joy;³³ though the plague foreshadows the end of this world, this world has nothing to offer for them.³⁴ They must hold out until they may reach Christ: death is something valuable, promising the hope of eternal salvation. Cyprian urges his community not to cling to life in the prevalence of the plague.³⁵ After dealing with the problem of the epidemic's striking down of pagan and Christian indiscriminately, he directs attention to the symptoms of suffering (*dolor*) caused by the plague and reminds the faithful of the fact that they are not immune to the suffering.

27 Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum* 2; FC 36, 168.

28 See e.g. Tertullian, *Apologia* 40.2; FC 10, 102.

29 Palmer 2014: 90–92.

30 Cyprian, *Ad Demetrianum* 10; FC 36, 176.

31 Scourfield 1996: 14. See also Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 1; FC 36, 199.

32 Dunn 2006: 217; Scourfield 1996: 15.

33 Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 2-5; FC 36, 200–203.

34 For his view of the world, see also Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 25; 219; Hunink 2010: 40.

35 For the correlation of *De mortalitate* with *De opere et eleemosynis*, see Dunn 2006: 367–368.

[E]ye trouble and attacks of fevers and every ailment of the members we have in common with others as long as this common flesh is borne in the world.³⁶

Further details are given in the effects of the disease when he confirms the belief that Christians should persevere by faith and show fortitude and patience in the outbreak of a deadly epidemic.

That now the bowels loosened into a flux exhaust the strength of the body, that a fever contracted in the very marrow of the bones breaks out into ulcers of the throat, that the intestines are shaken by continual vomiting, that the blood-shot eyes burn, that the feet of some or certain parts of their members are cut away by the infection of diseased putrefaction, that, by a weakness developing through the losses and injuries of the body, either the gait is enfeebled, or the hearing impaired, or the sight blinded, all this contributes to the proof of faith.³⁷

It is interesting to note that pagans would have drawn back from the message of Cyprian, who told his congregation to accept the plague willingly. Pagans would not have regarded it as proof of God's love and mercy.³⁸ However, Cyprian displayed a high sensitivity to the 'anxiety' among those who were under his care.

How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and everyone and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion to their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted begging their help, [...] Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown.³⁹

Although he defines the plague as the bearer of death, Cyprian has in mind by asking a series of questions that it examines and tests the state of their minds: how

36 Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 8; FC 36, 205.

37 Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 14; FC 36, 210.

38 Nutton 2004: 287.

39 Cyprian, *De mortalitate* 16; FC 36, 212.

the Christians have responded to the demand to care for those in need. He is concerned about not only a test of faith in the same way that the persecution did, but also a sensitivity to the frailty of the human condition and the susceptibility to disease and death.⁴⁰ In this regard, Cyprian asked them to undertake the care of the sick throughout the society. He appealed to the 'publican or heathen' alike for help, by 'loving even his enemies, and by further praying for the salvation of his persecutors'. He claimed that no distinction should be made in cherishing both Christians and pagans. His activity in organising the care of victims of the plague lasted until his exile five years later.⁴¹

Concluding remarks

The study made so far does not draw valid conclusions, partly because I have confined myself to the evidence for the plague in Cyprian's treatises properly speaking, and have not considered his corpus and the contemporary witnesses of the epidemic. Nonetheless, results have been attained which may be considered as suggestive both of his attitude to the care for his congregation, and of the motivation of his references to the medico-religious practices. Concerning the 'Plague of Cyprian', unlike the Antonine Plague that was recorded by Galen, Cyprian did not approach the nature of the disease from a viewpoint that the later people could make it specific and identifiable. Instead, he had an interest in emphasising its outbreak as civil unrest and disorder spread through the city. Cyprian directed attention to the care for his audience whose relatives and friends were diseased and dying. They feared the indiscriminate infection of the disease. He attempted to relieve their anxiety. Thus, he seems to be more concerned with a way of dealing with the realities and an attitude of the survived to the diseased rather than with the care for grief and sorrow. His position is marked on the distinction between the practical and spiritual, the temporal and eternal, and the emotional and rational way of thinking. From the underlying motivation for instructing his congregation, especially with moral control and self-discipline, the anxiety and sorrow resulting from the calamity must be overcome by his claim that their suffering will be rewarded with eternal joy in heaven.

⁴⁰ Penniman 2015: 210.

⁴¹ Pontius, *Vita Cypriani* 9; FC 15, 14. See also Ferngren 2009: 118–19.