The Romans were conducting the festival called in their language the ‘bedspread’ (*sc. lectisternium*) in response to the bidding of the Sibylline oracle. For a kind of pestilence sent by the gods and incurable by human skill had led them to consult the oracle.\(^1\)

—**Dionysius of Halicarnassus**, *Roman Antiquities*, 12.9.1

Long, long ago a plague walked through the city
And Roman air was death; one saw pale bodies
Sink into wasting sickness everywhere.
Spent with continual round at funerals,
And knowing that physicians could do nothing,
Men looked to heaven for a sign of cure.\(^2\)


The two passages quoted above, which refer to epidemics that struck the city of Rome in 399 BCE and 293 BCE respectively, both describe collective responses to health crises that affected the Roman populace. In both cases, we also know from Livy that the turn to supernatural healing was a formal decision by the Senate that involved a complex official procedure.\(^3\) The Roman Senate treated epidemic disease as a religious problem for over four centuries, starting in

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1 ἑορτὰς ἦγον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι τὰς καλουμένας τῇ ἐπιχωρίῳ γλώττῃ στρωμνὰς ὑπὸ τῶν Σιβυλλείων κελευσθέντες χρησμῶν. νόσος γάρ τις λοιμώδης γενομένη θεόπεμπτός τε καὶ ὑπὸ τέχνης ἀνθρωπίνης ἀνίατος εἰς ζήτησιν αὐτούς ἰσχυρεῖ τῶν χρησμῶν. Translations by the author unless otherwise noted.

2 Dirā lues quondam Latias vitiaverat auras,
pallidaque exsangui squalebant corpora morbo.
Funeribus fessi postquam mortalia cernunt
temptamenta nihil, nihil artes posse medentum,
auxilium caeleste petunt mediamque tenentes.

3 399 BCE: Livy 5.13–14; 293 BCE: Livy 10.47.
the early fifth century BCE and apparently ending in the middle of the first. Over the course of this period, Greek medicine increasingly became a part of Roman private life. Aside from a failed experiment with a publicly sponsored Greek physician in 219, however, the Roman government paid little official attention to Greek medicine until the fall of the republic, when Greek-style doctors were awarded certain special privileges. Even then, Greek physicians were not directly consulted by Roman authorities regarding anything we might call public health, nor did epidemiology in the modern, statistically-grounded sense ever develop.

While the Roman Senate largely ignored Greek medicine during the republic, it could not completely ignore certain aspects of the collective health of the Roman people. It is clear from the historical record that the senate frequently claimed the authority to end outbreaks of infectious disease in Rome through religious means, as in the two cases cited above. Various infectious diseases were endemic at Rome and a certain level of illness in the city was normal, but occasionally a disease had unusually high mortality, infected enough people, and disrupted everyday life to such a degree that the normal methods of healing were conspicuously ineffectual. In these cases, the Senate was quick to step in to mediate with the gods on behalf of the state.

In this paper, I explore the republican Senate's treatment of instances of epidemic disease as prodigies—as religiously significant public events. Of special interest are several cases in which the senatorial remedies appeared to fail. Before turning to the source material for the republic, I examine Roman medical writing, mostly of significantly later date, in order to elucidate the reasons

4 All dates are BCE unless otherwise noted.
5 There are various appearances of physicians in literary sources discussing the early republic (e.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. Rom. 10.53.1, Ovid, Met., 15.13, Valerius Maximus 2.4.5); more convincing are the provision in a fourth century Lex Aquilia that concerns the malpractice of physicians and the existence of the word medicus in the works of Plautus. Amphitryon refers to medicinis (doctors' offices) as if there were several in the centre of Rome (Plautus, Amphitryon 4.5). See Nutton 2004, 166–167.
7 See Nutton 2000, esp. 71: there was 'little or no connection between the practitioners of ancient medicine and public health' in general in the Roman world.
8 In the Republic, these normal methods of healing could include consultations with a physician or other healer such as a midwife; individual religious healing such as is found at Asclepieia and various other sites associated with a healing cult (as attested by votive dedications at Nemi, Portonaccio, and other Italian sanctuaries); and perhaps self-directed folk medicine along the lines of that described by Cato the Elder in De agricultura 158–160.