THE ANTONINE PLAGUE AND THE
‘THIRD-CENTURY CRISIS’

CHRISTER BRUUN*

Introduction: the Antonine plague

This paper will discuss two broad topics, the plague under Marcus Aurelius and the development of the Roman empire from the late second century onwards, and the relations between these two phenomena. The English word ‘plague’ is here used in the general sense of ‘potentially lethal epidemic disease’. I do not want to imply that we are dealing with the ‘bubonic plague’ caused by the *yersinia pestis* bacillus (discovered or identified in 1894),¹ as today no one knows for certain what disease spread through the Roman world from 165 C.E. onwards, regardless of much speculation on the matter.²

The role of the plague among the causes of the ‘third-century crisis’

The ‘third century crisis’ is in itself a debated topic, as is made abundantly clear in other contributions in this volume. To save time and space, I will simply take it for granted that changes affected the Roman world from the reign of Marcus Aurelius onwards which in certain

---

¹ S.K. Cohn Jr., *The Black Death Transformed* (London 2002), 1. Cohn incidentally convincingly refutes the common notion that the European Black Death was bubonic plague, as do S. Scott and C.J. Duncan, *Biology of Plagues: Evidence from Historical Populations* (Cambridge 2001). The Black Death was likely a viral infection.

² Cf. W. Scheidel, ‘A model of demographic and economic change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine plague’, *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 15 (2002), 97–114, especially 99 “If the Antonine Plague was indeed a highly virulent form of smallpox”.

* Warm thanks are due to Lukas de Blois, Olivier Hekster, Gerda de Kleijn and the other organizers of the colloquium in Nijmegen. I am most grateful to Wolfgang Habermann for offprints and to Jonathan Edmondson for helpful comments on the content and for improving my English; all remaining errors are my own. Part of the research for this paper was carried out while the author enjoyed a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which is gratefully acknowledged.
ways were detrimental to the stability of the Roman Empire. Several rulers of the Severan dynasty can be blamed for various actions, but arguably the roots of the problem went deeper, i.e., to the economic, social and political foundations of the Roman world. Some scholars have thought that the Antonine plague affected these foundations so deeply that Rome started to decline after the reign of Marcus Aurelius. The discussion in this paper will focus on the decades preceding and immediately following Marcus’ reign, down to the end of the Severan dynasty; thus the military anarchy of the mid-third century will not concern us here.

The interest in the effects of the Antonine plague is not new in Roman history. While it played no role in Gibbon’s work, already Niebuhr considered it to have had serious effects on the Roman empire, especially in the cultural sphere. Another notable scholar with a similar view was Seeck. The title of Boak’s work on manpower shortage signals a similar approach, while Mazzarino considered the plague and the wars under Marcus as the origin of the economic crisis of Rome.

Rostovzeff, on the other hand, considered the plague on a par with foreign wars, poverty, and rebellion, and vehemently denied that depopulation would have constituted a factor in the weakening of the empire. He saw the roots of the crisis in a social upheaval in which the soldiery destroyed the bourgeois elite of the Roman world. The recently discovered notes from Mommsen’s lectures on Roman imperial history from 1883 show him to have been similarly brief on the plague and its effects. He, like Rostovzeff later on, for the most part blamed political events for the budding crises under the Severans: “Lastly, there were the evil effects of incessant military insurrections.”

---

5 A.E.R. Boak, Manpower Shortage and the Fall of the Roman Empire (Ann Arbor 1955), 19.
7 M.I. Rostovzeff, The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire (Oxford 1957), 371, 374–375, and at 495: “Now, no political aim was at stake: the issue between the army and the educated classes was the leadership of the state (...) Such was the real meaning of the civil war of the third century. The army fought the privileged classes, and did not cease fighting until these classes had lost all their social prestige and lay powerless and prostrate under the feet of the half-barbarian soldiery.”