The Justinianic Plague Pandemic:
Progress and Problems

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This volume is a collection of papers on the so-called Justinianic plague pandemic of 541-750. The pandemic was constituted by a number of plague epidemics in this period, a distinction to which I will return in the concluding section of this essay. The volume consists of twelve papers distributed over five sections: “Introduction,” “The Near East,” “The Byzantine Empire,” “The Latin West,” “The Challenge of Epidemiology and Molecular Biology,” which together constitute an exceptionally valuable volume on this important but much neglected historical topic. The editor, L. K. Little, has performed an excellent job in selecting and arranging these papers. This success reflects also a new interest in the topic. The authors present and process new data based on literary sources, archaeological findings and the new discipline of paleomicrobiology, which permits recovery of genetic material (DNA) from skeletal remains in plague graves for identification of the pathogen of the disease.

The papers cover an extraordinary range of subjects. In the Introduction, J. N. Hays raises a number of central questions that are too often neglected, for instance, how societies have perceived epidemics, how they respond to epidemics, the relevance and usability of modern biomedical understanding, identification of epidemics, and how societal structures affect the spread of epidemics, and so
on. Although some of his comments or considerations are problematic for various reasons, they are consistently presented in ways suitable for further discussion. D. Stathakopulos provides a very useful overview of all known plague epidemics of the Justinianic pandemic in the Byzantine Empire, while A. Stoclet gives a fine presentation of how people reacted to the “battalions of sorrows” that assailed them in the time of plague, especially in Gaul in the “Early Middle Ages.” There are also papers relating specifically to plague in “Spanish Late Antiquity” as well as in England and Ireland. In a long paper, R. Sallares discusses the alternative theories of plague put forward by G. Twigg, S. Scott, C.J. Duncan, and S.K. Cohn, displaying good knowledge of the standard works on plague and making a number of good points, although his loyalty to the central topic of the volume restricts his selection of concrete epidemiological and clinical arguments. The sources for these plague epidemics are relatively few compared with those for the subsequent plague epidemics starting with the Black Death. As a consequence of the relative paucity of sources, the range and quality of information usable for arguments, analysis, and comparison with the results of modern plague research is quite restricted by comparison with those for the Black Death. On the other hand, Sallares raises a number of relevant arguments based on the manifestations of the Justinianic pandemic; however, this discussion can be considered only a good attempt at a far more complex topic.

In his introductory paper, Little provides a brief presentation of the new development of paleomicrobiological techniques for identification of bacterial DNA in dental pulp recovered from skeletal remains in plague graves. The last paper, M. McCormick’s “Toward a Molecular History of the Justinianic Pandemic” focuses on paleomicrobiology, but also on a number of other subjects not associated with its title. His point of departure is, of course, the great breakthrough in paleomicrobiological techniques developed by French scholars leading to the identification of \( \text{Yersinia pestis} \) in various plague graves in southern France from the period 1348-1722.\(^1\)

\(^1\) M. Drancourt, G. Aboudharam, M. Signoli et al., “Detection of 400-year old \( \text{Yersinia pestis} \) DNA in Human Dental Pulp: An Approach to the Diagnosis of Ancient Septicemia,” \textit{Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of