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The Contributions of St. Cyprian:
Perspectives on Epidemiology and early Christianity

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In the third century AD a pandemic ravished the Roman Empire. Death smothered communities effectively with devastating outcomes. The plague struck terror in those whose hearts were left beating. Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, wrote testimony about the pandemic. Cyprian’s writings offer a view into how early Christians dealt with the pressing issue of human mortality and show how Christianity would be very appealing to a primarily pagan population, in a time of high mortality. To explain catastrophes humans have turned to religion and supernatural powers, even before sedentary agriculture. The Christian faith offered a new view on death that made suffering appear to be worthwhile. Saint Cyprian addresses how early Christians tried to see death as a reward, but struggled to do so. Cyprian offers valuable insights to the students of history by depicting a reliable account of the plague so as to build accounts of epidemiology, and as an abstract concept, Cyprian illustrates the moral battles surrounding fatality of early Christians.

Records from the time do not prevail as to a census of deaths, although at its peak up to 5000 people died every day.¹ Corpses had to be hauled away from the cities in a stream of carts. Death struck like lightning. Records are scarce but the fear the plague created was clearly tangible. Cyprian observed and recorded; “[t]he bowels, relaxes into a constant flux, discharge the bodily strength.”² Cyprian approached the epidemic with a level head he preached calm over the people instead of adding to the chaos. He delivered tranquil peace of mind to his believers.

Cyprian was not born a Christian, but born into affluence in Carthage around 200 A.D. Carthage is in modern day Tunisia, Northern Africa. In the third century Carthage was part of the thriving Roman Empire. At birth his given name was Thasius Cyprianus.³ He grew up to be a teacher of rhetoric and a figure in the court, as lawyer or orator. His childhood and adolescence are foggy with myths such as the oral ballad composed by Empress Eudocia. Few dependable sources with even fewer dependable facts depict Cyprian’s early life. Still, the
Empress Eudocia composed versus describing Cyprian’s youth in the early fifth century from the first provocative tongue.

“I am Cyprian who since my tender childhood was devoted to Apollo as a precious gift and still as an infant initiates in the dramatic performance of the dragon. I was not seven years old when I went to the mysteries on Mithras, and being a stranger in Athens, but through zeal of my parents having become a citizen… I apprehended from the Phrygians and I learned how to inspect the liver among the barbarians I learned divination from birds and the contortions of four footed animals …and the superficial effects of disease on the bodies as though the natural and the natural as though feigned, and oaths which are heard and not hears and agreements in hostility. Nothing on the earth nor in the sea nor in the air was hidden from me, neither in the way of apparitions nor in the way of knowledge; no changeful things, no mechanical, no artificial things, not even legerdemain with the text of scripture and all such things.”

The tone is almost mocking Cyprian as a devout pagan worshiper. It would seem ironic from these verses that later in his life Cyprian joined the Christian faith and preached passionately in the name of God.

It was not until 246 when Cyprian had reached middle age that he was baptized and converted to Christianity. Coming from a wealthy background, Cyprian gave a sizable portion of his wealth to the poor community. As was expected of a man of his rank and wealth. His philanthropy helped win support from the common people. Still, some church insiders were wary of Cyprian because of his formal education and his career in the legal courts. But Cyprian quickly rose through the ranks and became bishop in 249, with the support of the community. The Decian persecution divided the church in 250 and motivated Cyprian to flee from his home. Over the course of the epidemic, Cyprian preached for strength to the church and belief in the salvation through service to God. He took the position that people would show their true colors in the face of death. “How necessary, that pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race.” Cyprian followed what he believed – the Christian faith, and aid to the suffering - when faced with death. His benevolence expanded into aid for the needy by the means of medical attention to the sick and dying. In 258
Cyprian was persecuted again and did not flee from the charges; he was beheaded in Carthage by the Romans and died a martyr. In the confines of his faith, Cyprian received high honor “there (in heaven) a great number of our dear ones is awaiting us.” He was remembered as a martyr and later granted sainthood.

In an attempt to reunite the Roman Empire and restore it’s grandeur, Emperor Decius who took power in 250 AD, implemented mandatory sacrifices to the polytheistic Roman gods. Christians were persecuted because of their refusal to take part in the heathen practice. Rome was characteristically through in their persecution. “All Christian Churches (and, as it appears, any house in which the Scriptures might be discovered) were to be destroyed. All copies of the Scriptures and other liturgical books were to be surrendered and burnt, and all church plate and other property was to be confiscated.” Cyprian had motivation to flee; abandoning his faith was not an option and he was not yet ready to meet God in death.

Cyprian fled from Carthage to an unknown location where he would have been safe from persecution. Roman persecution would have spelled out death, and Cyprian felt he was not done doing God’s work on the earth. Cyprian and those who followed him in evading the Roman law stayed true to the Christian faith. Carthage is in Northern Africa so he would have had a viewpoint further removed by simply distance and an ocean from the Roman persecution, but still heavily affected by the plague.

By the third century Pax Romana had expired and Rome had evolved out of it’s golden age. The Empire was in decline for a multitude of reasons, including external pressure from encroaching hostile populations. Plague was a factor in disintegrating the golden age because it scattered and reduced the military force of Rome, and it sent the workforce and farm workers to sickbeds. Across the Empire people were dropping dead, no way to prevent the onset of disease and no way to cure it. “The clinical picture included redness of the eyes, fever and thirst, inflammation of the throat and pharynx, diarrhea and vomiting, paralysis of the lower extremities, even terminal gangrene of the feet and legs.”
Epidemiologists today are still unsure exactly what caused the pandemic of 251. The leading possibility is small pox, although influenza and other diseases are not ruled out. The plague evolved out of Ethiopia, and spread as far North as Scotland. Cyprian would have been at an optimal viewing point for the effects of the plague.

Cyprian of Carthage gave a sermon as the plague broke out. This was put into writing and became one of his treatises. The sermon was addressed to the whole of the Christian community though the speech would have only reached the ears of those in Cyprian’s immediate vicinity. The record Cyprian made is one of the few lasting reliable sources on this epidemic, and on epidemiology in the third century AD.

Reliable sources are few and far between on topics such as medicine and disease in the classical world. Cyprian is biased because of his Christian faith, but this bias covers topics such as why the pandemic happened or what would happen after death. When it comes to describing the effects of the disease Cyprian had a firsthand view unbiased by his Christian faith. Cyprian describes the physical conditions:

“that a fire originated in the marrow ferments into wounds of the fauces; that the intestines are shaken with a continual vomiting; that the eyes are in fire with the injected blood; that in some cases the feet or some parts of the limbs are taken off by the contagion of diseased putrefaction …that hearing is obstructed, or the sight darkened…”

Cyprian’s accounts allow the disciplines of not only history, but of epidemiology and medicine to have an accurate and first-hand account of plague.

A history of epidemiology is fleeting because doctors and scientists in history had little knowledge on what caused sicknesses. When the symptoms of a disease are recorded, modern scientists can look back and analyze what could have caused the symptoms. Comprehending what ancient diseases were can help scientists understand not only the evolution of harmful bacteria and viruses, but the evolution of the human immune system.

Much of the information around medicine and mortality in post-classical Rome is biased. Epidemics are especially difficult to understand because without
the aid of modern medicine it is difficult to tell what the cause of an epidemic was. Graveyards show records of some deaths and the formation of the burial sight can give some insight as to how hurriedly the bodies were buried and how carefully they were buried. Also graveyards can provide census on mortality rates. But, but child death is skewed. While some babies may have died in birth others may have been aborted, or abandoned. Infant mortality rates of Rome are very difficult to interpret accurately, and they bring the life expectancy down drastically. Most children who live past the age of seven in Rome would make it past the age of 35. In the empire of Rome the life expectancy was 21.1 years, but in the Roman portions of North Africa, the life expectancy expanded to 23.2 years. Life expectancy comes from the mean of the age at which a person became deceased. Rome and Roman North Africa could have been different for many reasons, including the fact that North African Roman government was not as brutal as was in other parts of Rome. In southern Europe the two most common fatalities were caused by respiratory related illnesses and influenza.

The Plague raged from around 250 to 265 AD, and was nicknamed the Plague of Cyprian because of his documentation of the epidemic. Cyprian’s treatises give scientific insight when analyzed with an awareness of the Christian beliefs.

In Rome during the third century, citizens and those residing under Roman rule were required to take part in the governmental cult enforced by the Decian persecution. The Christian Church was still forming in the third century. The period before the Council of Nicaea was the ante-Nicene: after the writings of the apostles, but before the time when only priests could interpret the will of God. Because of the Decian Persecution, Christians were targeted when before they had been left to do their own bidding. Although persecuted, the Christian faith gained popularity and momentum in the third century.

Widespread death gave the Christian Church an opportunity to act as philanthropists, and to attract converts. Under Roman rule, physicians helped those of the same class, and those who could pay for the doctor’s fees. Under the roof of the Christian church, all human lives were valued as equal. To a
certain extent aid was given to those in need, independent from class divisions. The act of tending to the sick is included in the Christian faith and written in the Bible. The aid given by Christians to those in need had wider affects than immediate ease for the dying. By helping those in need the Christian church built its rapport, its doors were open when other institutions denied those in need. In the Christian God’s eyes all humans are equal, so the theology was heavily appealing to indigent peoples who were seen as lower class individuals. Politically the Church gained strength in numbers and power by aiding the needy and being inclusive to the lower class.

Cyprian uses consolation tactics different from pagan or other religions, his ability to soothe the fear of death is part of what makes Christianity so appealing in a time of plague. Cyprian uses sly consolation tactics. He argues to his followers that death is redemption. That one should embrace death and be excited to go to god. He then adds that one should not mourn for deceased loved ones because they are with god.

“Rather, beloved brothers, let us with pure hearts, unbending faith, and stout courage be prepared for every wish of God; shutting out the fear of death, let us contemplate the immortality which follows it. Let us show that this is what we believe, so that we do not mourn the departure of our dear ones, and that when the day of our own summons arrives, we come to the Lord at his call gladly and without hesitation.”

Cyprian frames the widespread death and shapes it to his political means. Dying means being with god and the only way to assure your place with the “one true god” is by joining the Christian faith.

Asceticism was widely revered in Rome; a practice fueled by logic and discipline. Ascetics viewed grief as something unproductive and irrational. This approach did not aid the masses, they still mourned with heavy hearts. The Christian claim that once dead, a soul reaches a better place, eased the emotional turmoil for those with dearly departed relations.

Cyprian, as a representative of the Christian churches, offered entrance into the faith, and by accepting the Christian faith people could, in theory, face death without fear. Converts were drawn by the promise of a post-mortem afterlife free from mortal suffering. Death was highly probable in the time of
plague so an escape was to ease the burden on the soul. “The servants of God then had peace, then free, then tranquil repose, when, withdrawn from these whirlwinds of the world, we attain the harbor of home and eternal security, when having accomplished this death we come to immortality. For that is our peace, that our faithful tranquility, that our steadfast, and abiding, and perpetual security.” Cyprian publicizes the Biblical teachings that those who follow the Christian faith will be rewarded by life after death in the presence of the Almighty God.

Not all those who accept the Christian faith fully believed all of its teachings. A moral battle proceeded for Christians between the fear of death and acceptance of death. Cyprian shows this mental conflict of Christians by chastising those who accept the Christian faith but question the complete truthfulness that death is an escape. People were terrified to die and bury their loved ones. Cyprian seemed to scoff at the emotional suffering people put themselves through at the loss of life. “How preposterous and absurd it is, that yet when God calls and summons us from this world, we should not at once obey the commands of his will!” Cyprian read the terror on the faces of the people around him and told the people that they had no reason to be afraid, that to be afraid was to sin against God. Sick and fearful people are unproductive, if people accepted death then they could live their lives and do their earthly tasks with their full attention. Cyprian attempted to remove the people from their terror and motivated them back to work.

Christian churches had been political bodies long before the creation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire. They had authority over all of their believers, material wealth and resources from land, and its own army. By gaining salvation for the people, the church gained power over them to do their bidding; peasants would much rather work in the name of God and escape from mortal suffering than in the name of an oppressive lord. Although peasants in Rome were mostly free peasants, they still lead hard lives.

Christian converts were poor people with little power and less rights. An epidemic could have actually been beneficial to the lower class individuals.
Because of the decreased availability of hard labor workers, people could demand more for their labor. The church gained momentum with its converts and in a snowball effect gained more power as its people stood up for themselves.

Upon death many Christian converts left their land to the church. Cyprian fully believed in his message but the church, through his preaching could have gained much land and therefore wealth. With the church amassing so much wealth, Rome began to see the Christianity as a threat because of its’ ability to amass land power - to gain the peoples trust and act as the church asks.

By addressing different issues over faith, Cyprian’s testimony shows what the people of the time were thinking. Devout Christians wondered why they were dying as quickly as the Jews, Romans and the populace. “It disturbs some that this mortality is common to us with others, for the disadvantages of the flesh are common to us with the human race”22 The Christians believed that since they were the servants of their God, that they should be exempt from suffering. But Cyprian preaches the opposite to soothe the masses. He writes that suffering is a trial which brings the individual closer to God and that sacrifice by suffering is necessary because in death the individual will be rewarded for sacrifice and walk with the Heavenly Father.

The preaching’s of this time were crucial in shaping what would become the Roman Catholic Church. The faith of Christianity was still becoming stronger and responses such as aid to the needy, acceptance of suffering, and belief in glory after death became embedded in the foundations of the Christianity. Constantine allegedly saw a glowing cross hovering above Rome, Constantine conquered Rome and thus became the Emperor of Rome in 312 AD. Because of the ‘miracle’ of sighting of Christ with a cross, Constantine adopted the Christian faith and was baptized. Constantine took part in creating the Edict of Milan in 313 which led to official toleration of Christianity and freedom of worship.23 This was the a rocket launching pad for Christianity’s grown in numbers and popularity. The faith was still malleable in mid third century when Cyprian published his works; anyone could interpret the word of God, not just priests and
those with higher authority. Christianity was spreading and those who wanted to spread the word of God could do so with their own judgment, giving the preacher huge influence over his listeners.

When Saint Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage wrote the treatise “On Mortality,” his goal was to express to his fellow Christian believers the necessity of a whole-hearted belief in an afterlife that would make earthly suffering such as from an epidemic, bearable - that death would even be favorable. Cyprian accomplished more than motivating Christians, his writings showed that Christians were afraid of death. Cyprian helped shape the Christian faith by promoting aid to the needy. As the Christian religion grew stronger, the Roman Empire weakened. Christian theology told the commoners and peasants that they meant something in the eyes of God. Cyprian created a first hand account of an epidemic that is accurate and reliable, his writings offer insight to epidemiologists, and the study of medicine. Cyprian was different from others who wrote first drafts of history in the classical era. The treatise “On Mortality,” has left a lasting legacy. Because of his explanation of the plague in “On Mortality,” the plague of 251 is known as the plague of Cyprian, epidemiologists through the ages have referred back to Cyprian’s work to understand epidemics and calculate the effects of future epidemics. As a Christian, Cyprian left his mark by becoming a martyr and a saint. He is remembered for his relentless faith, used for an example of the ideal and studied in Sunday Schools. Unlike other Greek or Roman historians such as Thucydides or Cicero, Cyprian’s goal was not to write history, but to record his thoughts, teachings and to motivate his fellow Christians. Regardless, of his means, Saint Cyprian Bishop of Carthage gives insight to historical study of the growth of Christianity and of medicine in the late Roman Empire.
Notes


24. Horizon Church in San Diego includes St. Cyprian of Carthage into the curriculum as noted by Christina Schweirdt, a student there and a cousin of Iris Smith’s.
Bibliography


