



Justinian Plague

Yersinia Pestis is the microparasite that causes the bubonic plague. It has created three massive pandemics in the last 1500 years (500s to 700s AD, 1300s to 1700s AD, and late 1800s to early 1900s AD) that killed tens of millions of people each time.

Intensity

Nobody will ever know exactly how many people died in the Justinian Plague (541-749 AD), but it created similar circumstances to the later outbreak known as the Black Death (1347-51), which killed between one fourth and one third of Europe's population (with China also suffering massive deaths from it). The historian Procopius who lived through it, wrote that "the whole human race came near to being annihilated." He said that it afflicted Constantinople for 4 months in 542, and at its peak there, killed between 5000 and 10,000 people a day. It was observed first in Egypt in 541; by 543 it ranged from Spain to Iran. Over the next two centuries, it recurred in waves all over the Mediterranean, with its last outbreak in 749.

Short term impact

There were a lot of similarities between the devastation of the Justinian Plague and that of the Black Death. It is helpful to keep in mind that Europe didn't regain its pre-plague population until the mid 1500s, 200 years after the initial outbreak of the Black Death. Part of what made both of these outbreaks so deadly, was that it hit young people (with the least exposure and immunity to it) the hardest, requiring more time for a society to rebound demographically.

Widespread death brought about other consequences. There was a (1) **labor shortage**; contemporary sources observed wheat fields and vineyards with the harvest rotting, as there was nobody to pick it. With a shortage of labor, and a decline in food production, (2) **prices increased dramatically**. Justinian in an edict stated that wages were two to three times higher than they were before the outbreak, and decreed that wages would only be paid at the pre-plague levels. With tax revenues and population declining, (3) **the Roman empire faced problems providing enough soldiers for its campaigns in the West**, forcing it to rely more and more on barbarian soldiers. Agathias (d. 582 AD) said that the army should have had 645,000, but was down to 150,000 soldiers. Barbarian mercenaries would only serve in exchange for high wages, which further stripped bare the treasury. (4) **Treasuries were so bereft of gold that emperors attempted to cut army pay**. Maurice in 588 cut pay by one fourth until the army in the east mutinied; Heraclius in 616 did cut the pay by one half.

Long term consequence: fatal weakening of Roman defenses

Before the outbreak, the Roman army quickly reconquered North Africa & Italy from the Germanic tribes that took them in the 400s. But after that, their army struggled. The Ostrogoths in Italy launched a counterattack, and it wasn't until 551 that another large Roman force was sent to Italy to push the them back. But in 568, an invading Lombard force from Austria was able to march through Italy almost unopposed, so that by 571, most of Italy was captured—an anticipation of the rapid conquest of Roman territory demonstrated by the Arabs in the 630s AD.