

Body (Politic) Aches: Christianity as Disease among Imperial Roman Authors

Illness has long served as a metaphor for political and social instability. For example, Plato in his *Laws* and Cicero in his *In Catilinam* construct metaphors of the outsider as a disease and threat to the body politic. Later, this same metaphor is adapted to frame Christianity as a contagion. This paper argues that Tacitus, Emperor Claudius, and Pliny describe the emergence and spread of early Christianity as an epidemic breaking out in the Roman empire, and that each writer's classification of Christianity as a disease reflects the shifting power dynamics between emperor, subjects, and out-groups.

Insofar as the present evidence available, Tacitus' only extended reference to Christians occurs in *Annals* 15.44; however, the language he uses is striking. Terms such as *repressa*, *erumpebat*, and *malum* frame Christianity as a disease: one that breaks out (*erumpo*) and must be suppressed (*reprimo*). Both verbs appear in Celsus' *De Medicina*, where they carry medical connotations of disease spread and containment. While often translated "evil," I contend that *malum* in *Annals* 15.44 ought to be translated as "disease," especially when considering Tacitus' characterization of Christianity's spread (from Jerusalem to Rome) as infecting Rome like a disease.

In the same vein, Emperor Claudius in his letter to the Alexandrians (P. Lond. IV 1912) labels the Syrian Jews entering into Alexandria the "disease of society." Jones (1926) and Winter (1970) have speculated that these Jews may be an example of early Christian mission work; however, whether or not these Jews were in fact Christians, Claudius' language (like that of Tacitus and Pliny) shows the continuity in labeling *superstitio* with the metaphor of "disease." Claudius' characterization of these Jews as "the disease of the inhabited world" (τῆς οἰκουμένης

νόσον) demonstrates how Roman political language could be weaponized against groups perceived as harmful to the state.

Pliny likewise frames Christianity in epidemiological terms. Writing to Trajan, he describes how, “It is not only the cities, but villages and rural districts that the infection of that superstition spreads through” (*neque civitates tantum, sed vicos etiam atque agros superstitionis istius contagio pervagata est*, Plin. *Ep.* 10.96.9). Pliny’s structure here recalls Tacitus’ *non modo...sed etiam*, describing the nature and *scope* of the fast-spreading disease not just through the cities (*civitates*) but also through the villages (*vicos*). With the metaphor of disease, Pliny, Tacitus, and Claudius imply that the Roman empire exists as the body against which the disease attacks. This rhetoric appears to be an early example of regimes using “disease” to designate sects which were perceived as dangerous to the dominant power structure.

Taken together, these texts demonstrate how metaphors of illness became a shared rhetorical strategy for Roman elites confronting early Christianity. However, Pliny, Tacitus, and Claudius’ metaphors also provide insight into the changing relationship of power within Rome. Their works reveal how disease imagery both reflected and reinforced imperial power. Behind the scenes and between the lines, these three negotiate the demands of authoritarian power. The emperor becomes to be the healer of the state, and the Christian are cast as the cause of its decline. A diseased empire presents a problem to the *imperator*, but efforts to suppress the “disease” only deepen resentment within the body politic. These authors offer an early model of how such disease imagery could justify violence against an out-group and how imperial Roman authors negotiated power under authoritarian rule.

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