Epidemics: the first pandemic – the Justinianic Plague (541–549)

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The Early Medieval Pandemic began in 541 with the Justinianic Plague (Yersinia pestis) and continued through the 8th century. Today, echoes sound from the accounts of Procopius (c. 500 to after 565), Evagrius Scholasticus (born c. 536) and John of Ephesus (c. 507–588).

The historian Procopius says that pestilence embraced the entire world and blighted the lives of all men, respecting neither gender nor age, attacking at all times of the year, starting in Egypt, then to Palestine and on to the land of the Persians and barbarians (Dewing 1914). There was sudden fever, and within days a bubonic swelling developed in the groin or elsewhere. Some became comatose, forgot those familiar to them and seemed to be sleeping. If anyone cared for them, they would eat without waking; but some were neglected, and they died through lack of sustenance. Others developed delirium, with insomnia and distorted imagination: they suspected men were coming to destroy them, and would rush off in flight, crying out. Those attending them were in a state of constant exhaustion and had a most difficult time of it. Work of every description ceased, and in a city abound


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