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Title: Rethinking the Antonine Plague

Abstract: Concurrent disease outbreaks struck numerous cities in the Roman, Persian and Han Empires in the mid to late second century A.D. Most historians suspect a single cause—the Antonine plague—a pandemic that killed millions across Afro-Eurasia and destabilized antiquity's great empires. Surviving sources, however, offer few details for historians to reconstruct the Antonine plague's pathology. Interpretations instead favor indirect and circumstantial evidence almost exclusively from the Roman Empire, and historians have thus produced a wide range of diagnoses (smallpox, measles, bubonic plague, etc.), transmission models and mortality estimates (anywhere from 1-40 million in the Roman Empire alone). Further muddying perspectives are the social, economic, political and religious crises which emerged concurrent with the plague. Historians fiercely debate the Antonine plague's contributions (or not!) to the increasing tumult of the age. This talk argues that the Antonine plague was an unprecedented historical event not because it killed tens of millions, but rather because of its pandemic novelty. The disease was recognized by the Romans as a pestilence that could strike anyone anywhere—quite different than the localized epidemics with which they were familiar.