

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 24 – Death and Disease in
the Roman World

CLCS4007

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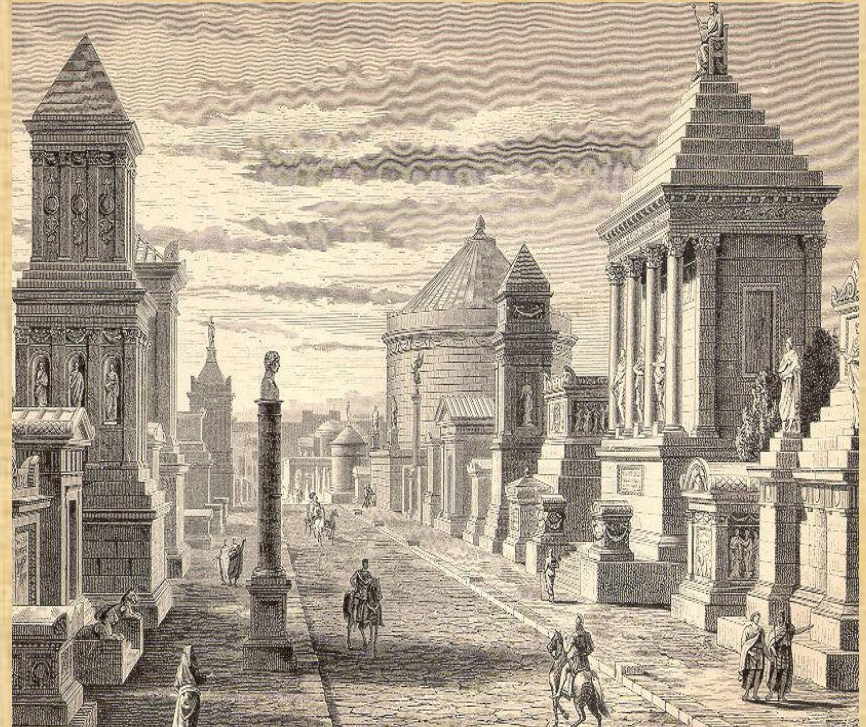
Evidence

- ▣ Literary descriptions - incidental comments or reports on major outbreaks of disease.
- ▣ Medical texts – Galen (large body of his texts survive), Celsus, Dioscorides (also comments from Pliny the Elder).
- ▣ Archaeological evidence – particularly the study of bones.
- ▣ Epigraphic evidence – funerary inscriptions.
- ▣ Comparative studies of later periods.
 - lack of detailed statistical evidence for ancient Rome.

Disposing of the Dead

The Sacred Pomerium

- ▣ Forbidden to do so inside the Pomerium in most cases.



Via Appia

Cremation

Cremation was the typical procedure used in Roman funerals: the ashes from a cremation were gathered and placed in a small stone chest, an urn or other container



‘Columbarium’ – Puteoli.

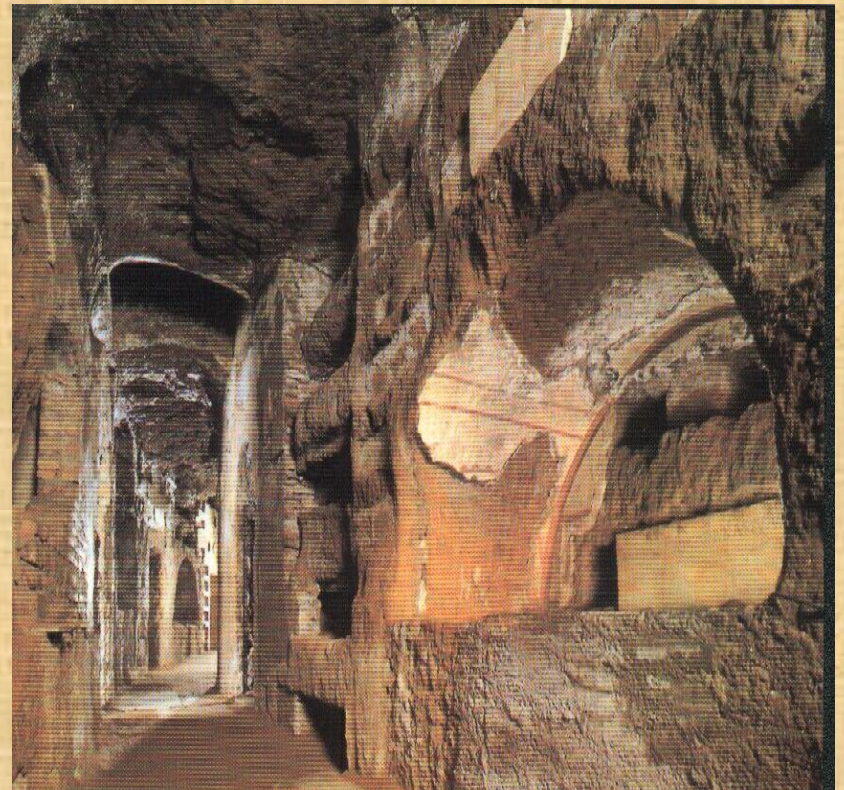


Inhumation

Inhumation: increasingly popular from the third century AD.



Ludovisi sarcophagus, mid. 3rd c. AD.
Battle between Romans and Barbarians.



Catacombs – Rome.

Commemorating the Dead

Tombstone of Gaius Saufeis, Lincoln, 60s AD.

'To Gaius Saufeius, son of Gaius, of the Fabian voting-tribe, from Heraclea, soldier of the Ninth Legion, aged 40, of 22 years' service; he lies here

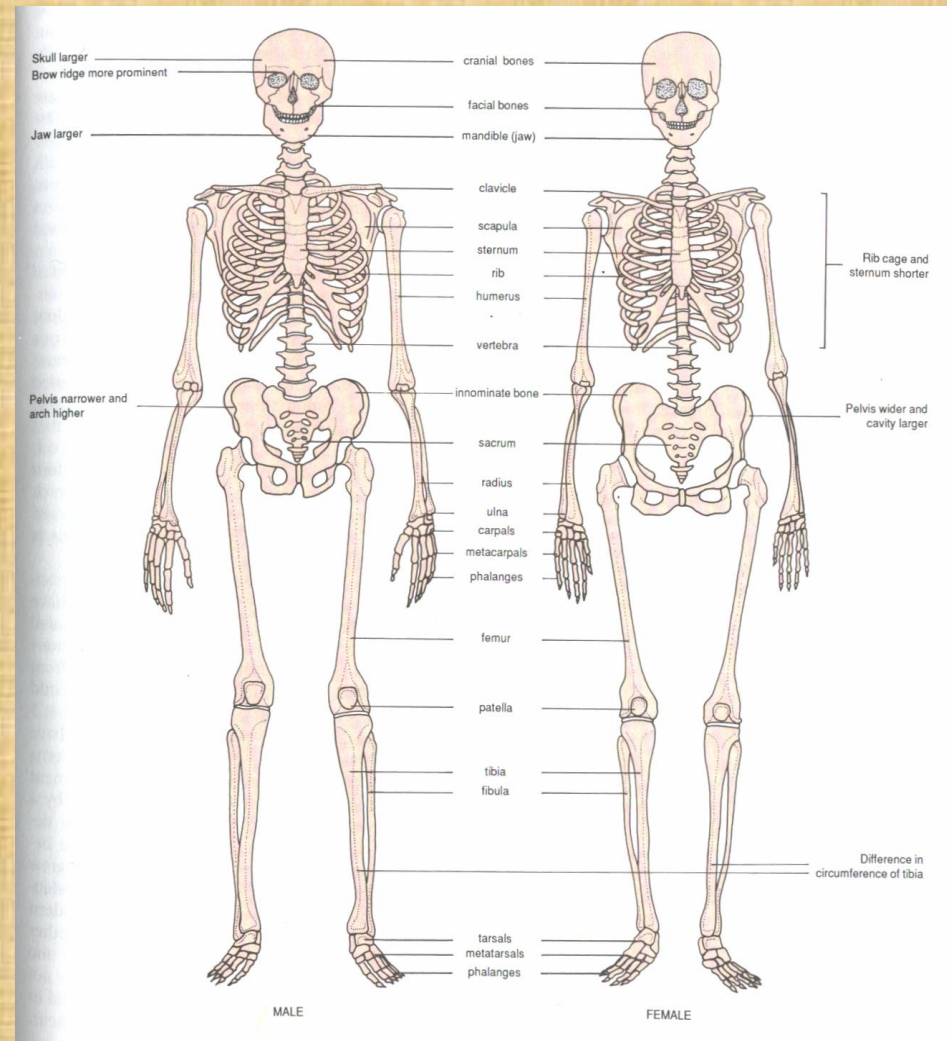


Christian Commemoration

- ❑ Large numbers of Christian funerary epitaphs in catacombs of Rome - catacombs extend for thousands of kilometres beneath Rome.
- ❑ Record, age, gender, professions and (most importantly) time of death (varying degrees of precision) – latter of especial importance to Christians.
- ❑ A useful sample of nearly 4,000 is available.
- ❑ The inscriptions provide an unusually good representative sample (bar infants).

Palaeopathology

- Dental, cranial and skeletal anomalies can give indications of stress and disease.
- DNA can be used to reveal evidence of pathogens.
- About 5,000 skeletons have been retrieved from Roman catacombs.



Disease in Rome

The City of Rome

- ▣ The highest population density in the Empire, perhaps around 1 million during first century AD.
- ▣ High level of mortality – probably higher death rate than birth rate, population growth due to immigration.
- ▣ Rome is located on malarial plains close to the river and between the hills – general Tiber valley area and lowland of Latium.
- ▣ Limited sanitation facilities and cramped housing, flooding Tiber and water run-off from the hills a problem.

Malaria

- ▣ Endemic disease – a disease specific to certain locations and peoples.
- ▣ Medical writers describe symptoms of malaria in the Mediterranean:
 - malignant tertian fever (caused by *plasmodium falciparum*) - can cause a fever of up to 41 °C and induce anaemia;
 - benign tertian fever (*P. vivax*)
 - quartan fever (*P. malariae*).
- ▣ Those born in the city (whose survive into adulthood) develop a degree of immunity to locally active strains.

Vitellius' Army - AD 69

“As for the soldiers, the barracks were crowded, and the overflow spread through the city, finding shelter in colonnades and temples... Many of them even imperilled their lives by settling in the pestilent Vatican quarter, thus increasing the rate of mortality. They were close to the Tiber, and the Germans and Gauls, who were particularly liable to disease and could ill stand the heat, ruined their constitutions by their passion for the river.” – Tacitus *Histories* 2.93.

Seasonal Mortality

- ▣ Seasonal distribution of deaths recorded on funerary epitaphs – ‘In late antique Rome, about 38 per cent of close to 4,000 attested deaths occurred in August, September and October.’ – 1.8 times the average for the year - Scheidel (2003) 162.
- ▣ This season coincides with high prevalence of malaria, and other disease typical of the hot-season.
 - “Now with fading autumn giving way to frost, now with invalids prone to less frequent fevers.” – Juvenal *Satire* 4.56-57.

Fig. 3: Seasonal Mortality: Modern United States

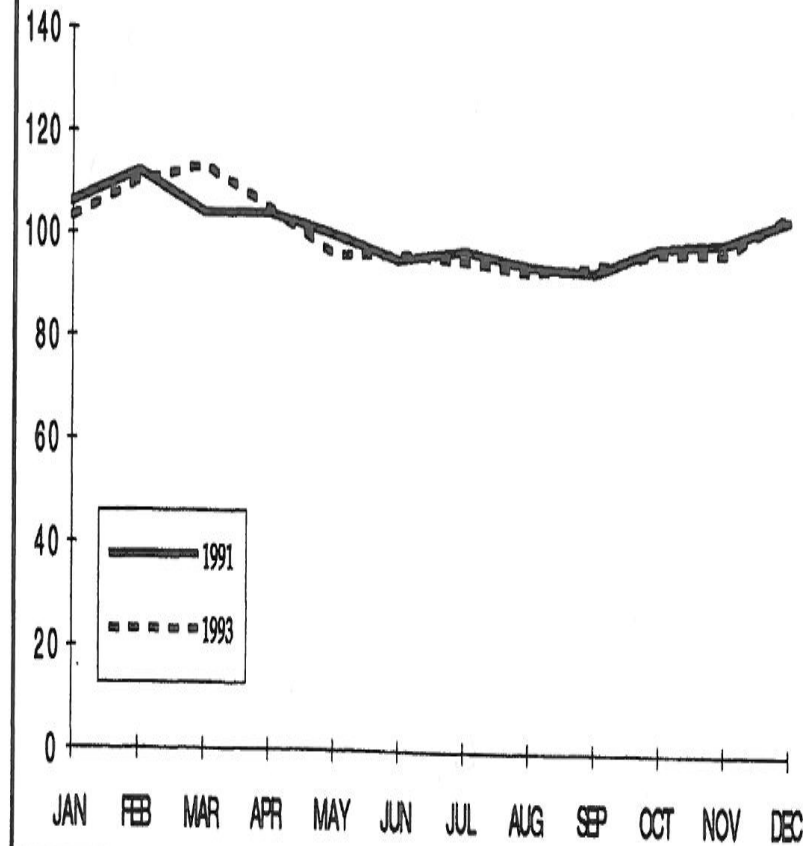
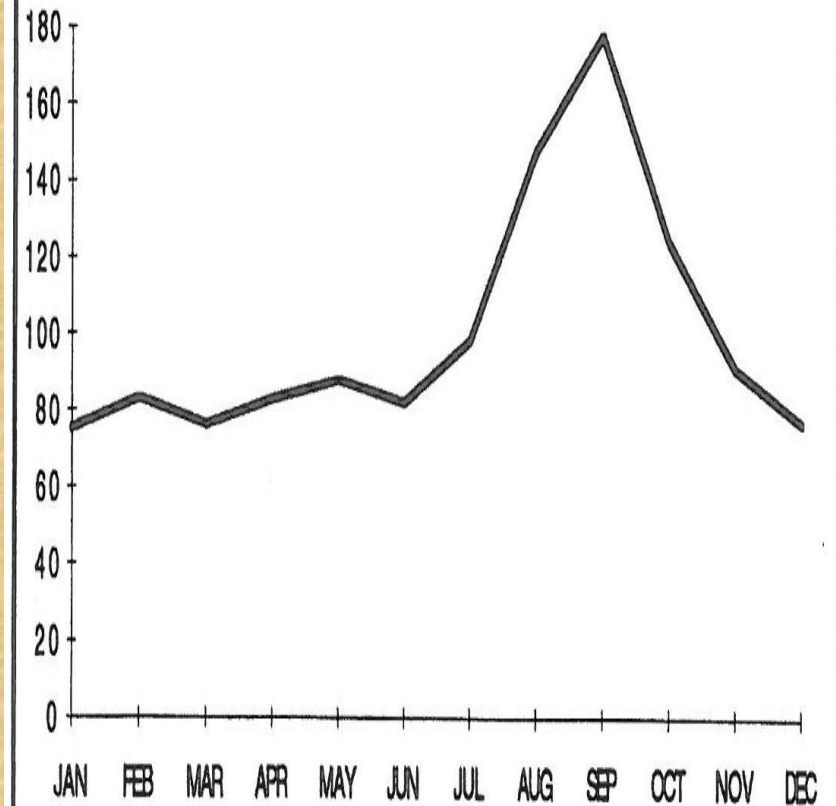


Fig. 5: Seasonal Mortality: Rome: All (N = 3938)



Data source: Table 1: primary sources: Rome.

Tables from Shaw (1996).

Summer “Recess” for the Elite

“It is true that the side of Tuscany, which extends along the coast, is unwholesome and pestilential ; but this property of mine is a long way from the sea, and, moreover, underlies the Apennine range, the most salubrious of mountains. – **Pliny the Younger Letters 5.6.**

“I hope to be at in Rome about the Ides of October...” – (1.7.4).

“I promised I’d only stay a week in the country, I’m a liar, I’ve been missing all August. And yet If you want me sound and in good health, Maecenas, As you indulge me when I’m ill, you’ll indulge me. When I fear illness, when heat and the early figs. Honour the undertaker with dark attendants, When pale fathers, fond mothers, fear for their children, When dutiful zeal, the petty affairs of the Forum, Bring on feverish bouts, break open sealed wills.” – **Horace Epistles 1.7.1-9.**

Other Disease in Rome

- ▣ Besides malaria, there were a wide array of other potential diseases and afflictions that could effect Rome.
- ▣ Typhus and cholera potentially serious problems, and generally infections of the respiratory and digestive systems.

“...this populous city, where daily ten thousand people cane be discovered suffering from jaundice [yellowing of the skin], and ten thousand from dropsy [edema – swelling caused by fluid accumulation]...” – **Galen 11.328.**

Leprosey

- ▣ *Mycobacterium leprae*.

“Men’s faces have recently been subject to new forms of disease, unknown in ancient times, not only to Italy, but to almost the whole of Europe. Still, however, they have not as yet extended to the whole of Italy, nor have they made any very great inroads in Illyricum, Gaul, or Spain, or indeed any other parts, to so great an extent as in Rome and its environs. Though unattended with pain, and not dangerous to life, these diseases are of so loathsome a nature, that any form of death would be preferable to them.” – **Pliny the Elder** *Natural History* 26.1.

Lichen

- ▣ Unidentified disease?

“The most insupportable of all these diseases is the one which, after its Greek appellation, is known to us as "lichen." ... [it] generally [makes] its first appearance at the chin... In many cases, however, this disease spreads over the interior of the mouth, and takes possession of the whole face, with the sole exception of the eyes; after which, it passes downwards to the neck, breast, and hands, covering them with foul furfuraceous (scaly) eruptions. **Pliny the Elder** *Natural History* 26.2.

Carbunculus

“We find it stated in the Annals, that it was in the censorship of L. Paulus and Q. Marcius [162 BC] that carbuncle was first introduced into Italy, a malady which till then had confined itself solely to the province of Gallia Narbonensis. In the year in which I am writing these lines, two persons of consular rank have died of this disease, Julius Rufus and Q. Lecanius Bassus; the former in consequence of an incision unskilfully made by his medical attendants, the latter through a wound upon the thumb of the left hand by pricking a carbuncle with a needle, a wound so small originally as to be hardly perceptible...It originally has the form of a hard, red, pimple, with a blackish head mostly, though sometimes of a livid colour. It produces tension of the flesh, but unattended with swelling, pain, or any itching sensation; indeed, the only symptom that accompanies it is a confirmed drowsiness, which overpowers the patient, and carries him off in the course of three days. Sometimes, however, it is accompanied with shuddering, and small pustules about the sore; and occasionally, though but rarely, with fever. When these symptoms extend to the fauces [passage at the back of the mouth] and oesophagus, death ensues with the greatest rapidity.” - **Pliny the Elder *Natural History* 26.4.**

Hygiene in Rome

- ▣ Civic eugertism not infrequently directed to providing / improving facilities connect to water supply and waste management.

“The consul Titus Quinctius Crispinus (9 BC) duly put the question to the people, and the people duly passed a vote in the Forum... Whoever... shall maliciously and intentionally pierce, break, or countenance the attempt to pierce or break, the channels, conduits, arches, pipes, tubes, reservoirs, or basins of the public waters which are brought into the City... he shall be condemned to pay a fine of 100,000 *sestertii* to the Roman people...” – **Frontius**
The Aqueducts of Rome 2.129.

- ❑ Many people collected water from public fountains and cisterns – overflow, plus presence of waste (and sometimes corpses) in the street created environment for germs to spread.
- ❑ Gastro-intestinal infections often caused by faecal contamination of drinking water - debate over the quality and extent of Roman sanitation.
- ❑ Unchlorinated water, especially heated baths, can also trigger bacterial growth.

Hygienic or Pool of Infection

▣ Visiting the baths?

“There is, again, another affection which the Greeks call *tenesmos*, lesser than all those last spoken of. It should be counted neither with acute nor with chronic diseases, since it is readily relieved, and never by itself fatal. As in the case of dysentery, there is equally the frequent desire to shit, and equally the pain when anything is passed. There is a discharge resembling phlegm and mucus; sometimes it is even slightly bloodstained; but mingled with properly formed faeces derived from food. The patient should sit in hot water, and make application frequently to his anus. – Celsus *De Medicina* 4.25.

Antonine Plague

The Great Outbreak – AD 165/66

“It was his [Lucius Verus] fate to seem to bring a pestilence with him to whatever provinces he traversed on his return, and finally even to Rome. It is believed that this pestilence originated in Babylonia, where a pestilential vapour arose in a temple of Apollo from a golden casket which a soldier had accidentally cut open, and that it spread thence over Parthia and the whole world. Lucius Verus, however, is not to blame for this so much as Cassius, who stormed Seleucia in violation of an agreement, after it had received our soldiers as friends.” - *S.H.A. Verus* 8.1-3.

- ▣ Galen describes a number of symptoms, including fever, vomiting, rank breath, mucus, coughs and ulcerations of the larynx and trachea.
- ▣ Various identifications for the plague have been made on basis of literary descriptions – exanthematous typhus, bubonic plague, or small-pox.
- ▣ Estimates of mortality rates vary from 1 to 2 % of Empire to 25%. R. Littman and M. Litmann (1973) – argue for around 7 to 10 % on the basis of its identification as small-pox.
- ▣ Recent discovery near what would become catacombs of St Peter reveal rooms with large numbers of tightly stacked corpses.

Outbreak of AD 189

“About this time, plague struck all Italy. The suffering was especially severe in Rome, since the city, which received people from all over the world, was overcrowded. The city suffered great loss of both men and animals... for some said that the sweet odour, entering first, filled up the sensory passages and kept out the poison in the air; or, if any poison should enter, it would be neutralized by the stronger odours. The plague, however, continued to rage unchecked for a long time, and many men died, as well as domestic animals of all kinds. – **Herodian 1.12.**

- Dio Cassius (72.14.3) mentions 2,000 fatalities a day during this epidemic.

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