

Plague, Violence, and Marcus Aurelius' War on Terror

After decades of relative tranquility, war came to the Danubian borderland in 166 CE. From a single raid into Pannonia the situation quickly escalated into a series of protracted conflicts between Rome and a coalition of tribes led by the Marcomanni, Quadi, and Iazyges. These Marcomannic Wars, which dominated the remainder of Marcus Aurelius' reign, have traditionally been seen as an important turning point in Roman history: the first in a seemingly-endless series of barbarian invasions culminating, eventually, in the collapse of the entire imperial edifice in the West. Such models have been rightly critiqued as overly simplistic and reliant on a toxic combination of anachronistic ideas about barbarian ethnicity and a propensity to uncritically accept the tone of desperate defense present in many late Imperial sources (Kovács 2014). This paper takes the critique farther, suggesting that far from an existential struggle, the Marcomannic Wars were not even a conflict of defensive necessity. With an incurable pandemic ravaging the known world, Marcus Aurelius found political refuge in an otherwise unremarkable border war. By playing on the fears and desires of the Roman populace, Marcus shepherded the empire through a dark moment and emerged with a legacy of stoic, principled leadership. The politics of fear and loathing underlying much of that reputation have largely been forgotten.

Based on the treaties preserved in Cassius Dio, the primary goal of the war was to reestablish hegemonic control over the Transdanubian tribes. Further territorial expansion was not a priority, despite Herodian's statements to the contrary (Kovács 2014). With the tribes seeking peace and alliance almost as soon as hostilities began, we must ask why the Marcomannic Wars dragged on for over a decade. The importance of plague for understanding this period should not be underestimated. Disease followed Lucius Verus back from the Parthian

campaign, and while calculating its demographic and economic impacts is notoriously difficult, this Antonine Plague seems to have been unusually severe and persistent, lasting until at least 182 CE. Thus, we should see the whole drama of the Marcomannic Wars as set against a backdrop of epidemic death, generating a general mood of depression and anxiety across the Roman world.

We must also consider the barbarian attacks into Italy and Greece. Early in the war, Marcomanni raided into Northern Italy, while Sarmati and Costoboci plundered the Sanctuary of Demeter at Eleusis. For the first time in centuries, barbarians dared to touch the Empire's two hearts, ravaging the countryside and defeating Roman defenders along the way. While Rome soldiered on with little lasting damage to its military or infrastructure, the same cannot be said for the collective psyche, particularly in the capital. Unexpected external violence within a space perceived as inviolate has the potential to be particularly traumatic to both first- and second-hand witnesses (Altheide 2006, Skrimshire 2008). Even though the damage was minimal, the raids *appeared* to call into question the whole edifice of the *pax Romana*. 'What happened at Opitergium could happen *here*,' must have been a common refrain throughout Italy as news of the attacks spread. "So great was the dread of this Marcomannic War, that [Marcus Aurelius] Antoninus summoned priests from all sides, performed foreign religious ceremonies, and purified the city in every way"(Hist. Aug., *Vita Marci* 13.1).

With disease raging across the empire, and blows struck against the cultural heartlands of both the Latin West and the Greek East, Marcus Aurelius pursued the border war with vigor out of proportion to the actual threat. Public sentiment surely demanded nothing less. This mood of terrified vengefulness lies behind Marcus' supposed desire to utterly eradicate the Sarmatian Iazyges (Dio 72.13). Marcus' column stands as another testament to Rome's dark mood.

Compared to Trajan's, the scenes of warfare are brutal and chaotic. The choice to repeatedly depict enslavement, execution, and the sacking of barbarian settlements has to be read as reflecting the tastes of the moment (Ferris 2009). These scenes of violence against utterly-defeated enemies, just like Marcus' putative plan to exterminate the Iazyges, are reflections of an atmosphere of fear ripe for such 'tough guy' rhetoric. Marcus may indeed have claimed to want the Iazyges dead and gone, but his words were never matched with deeds, despite multiple opportunities. As for the scenes of death and destruction on the column, that was just the reality of war, but the choice to blatantly illustrate the unsavory truth must reflect public sentiment during Marcus' war on terror.

Bibliography

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