CONFERENCE PAPER

Plague and Fractured Faith

Competing Religious Narratives During the Justinianic Plague

OVERVIEW

What I'll cover today

I. Why this question matters right now

II. The Justinianic Plague, briefly

III. My argument

IV. Four writers, four interpretations

V. Comparing the narratives

VI. The plague as a “cold weapon”

VII. From belief to policy

VIII. Why it still matters

A very old question, asked again in 2020

When COVID-19 spread, I noticed something odd: people weren't just disagreeing about the virus, they were disagreeing about what it meant — punishment, coincidence, someone's fault. That disagreement shaped what governments actually did.

That made me think of an older, harder case: the plague that hit the Byzantine Empire starting in 541 CE and kept returning in waves for roughly the next two centuries, until around 750. Contemporaries had no germ theory. What they had instead were priests, historians, and bishops, all offering rival explanations for why it had come — and each explanation happened to serve someone's interests.

A plague in three points, not a full chronicle — just enough to place the sources that follow.



III · MY ARGUMENT

How did rival religious authorities turn a shared catastrophe into a weapon for their own theological cause?

That's the question I set out to answer. My claim is that the plague didn't just get recorded — it got used. Procopius, John of Ephesus, Evagrius Scholasticus and Gregory of Tours each folded the same disaster into an argument that predates the plague itself: an argument about who holds true faith and legitimate authority. In that sense, the plague functioned as a “cold weapon” — not violence, but evidence, recruited after the fact.

IV · PRIMARY SOURCES

Four writers I'm building this on

01	**Procopius of Caesarea** *History of the Wars*	writes as a court historian — the human, circumstantial account
02	**John of Ephesus** *Ecclesiastical History; Lives of the Eastern Saints*	the Orthodox clergy's reading of events
03	**Evagrius Scholasticus** *Ecclesiastical History*	a Monophysite reading, and a survivor's own testimony
04	**Gregory of Tours** *History of the Franks*	the same pattern, transplanted to Merovingian Gaul

IV · FIRST VOICE

Procopius: keeping God out of it

History of the Wars

- Procopius was in Constantinople when the plague arrived, and he writes almost like a clinician — symptoms, death tolls, the collapse of burial and civic order.
- He's notably reluctant to hand the plague a single divine meaning. He gestures at natural causes — trade, crowding, administrative failure — and largely leaves theology aside.
- I read that reluctance as a choice, not an absence of belief. If the plague isn't obviously God's judgment, it can't be used as proof of Justinian's divine favor either.
- It also lines up with the far more critical portrait of Justinian's reign that Procopius gives us elsewhere, in the Secret History.

IV · SECOND VOICE

John of Ephesus: sin, saints, and survival

Ecclesiastical History · Lives of the Eastern Saints

- Where Procopius stays detached, John of Ephesus is direct: the plague is God's chastisement, a call to repentance for a people who have drifted.
- A large part of his work is devoted to holy men and ascetics whose devotion is shown protecting or sparing them — survival becomes a kind of evidence.
- Practically, this narrative does real work: it puts Orthodox clergy in the position of intermediaries between an angry God and a frightened population, at the exact moment imperial authority looks powerless to help.

IV · THIRD VOICE

Evagrius Scholasticus: writing it from the inside

Ecclesiastical History

- This is the one source among my four written by someone who actually survived the plague himself, as a child — which changes the register from reporting to testimony.
- Evagrius interprets his own survival, and the epidemic generally, through a Monophysite theological lens: one trial among a longer providential sequence of tribulation.
- He lists the plague alongside earthquakes, war, and famine — not isolated disasters, but instalments of the same ongoing test of faith.
- The personal stakes matter for my argument: Evagrius shows that this contest over meaning wasn't only a clerical power play, it was also how ordinary survivors made sense of what happened to them.

IV · FOURTH VOICE

Gregory of Tours: the same pattern, a different empire

History of the Franks

Gregory writes from Merovingian Gaul, well outside Constantinople's court politics, which is exactly why I think he's worth including. He treats plague, alongside flood and famine, as a sign of moral failure among Frankish nobility and clergy, and he leans heavily on the intercession of local saints and relics — which conveniently reinforces the standing of particular bishoprics and shrines. The details differ from the Byzantine sources, but the underlying move is the same: sin, punishment, and sanctioned holiness, doing political work under the cover of piety. That repetition, in a completely different kingdom, is what convinces me this isn't just an Eastern court quarrel — it's a broader pattern in how Christian societies processed catastrophe.

V · COMPARING THE FOUR

Same event, four different uses of it

Source	Explanation offered	Authority it happens to serve
Procopius	Circumstance and human failure	Distances the throne from divine blame
John of Ephesus	Divine chastisement for sin	Orthodox clergy and ascetic saints
Evagrius Scholasticus	A providential trial of the faithful	Monophysite communal identity
Gregory of Tours	Moral failing among local elites	Frankish bishops and local shrines

None of the four are disinterested. Each explanation happens to reinforce the authority its author already answers to — that pattern is the real finding here.

VI · THE CORE ARGUMENT

Why I call this a “cold weapon”

1

Catastrophe creates an opening.

Mass death and institutional strain leave people hungry for an authoritative explanation — a vacuum any faction can try to fill.

2

Whoever explains it best gains ground.

Winning public trust over “why this happened” also won standing in disputes over doctrine and legitimacy that predate the plague.

3

Blame gets redirected.

Heresy, impiety, moral laxity in a rival community could be recast as the true source of divine anger — without anyone raising a hand.

From belief to policy — and why it still matters

Then

- Imperial penance and church-building signalled that the state itself accepted a providential reading of events.
- Processions, relic veneration, and almsgiving expanded the Church's day-to-day authority over civic life.
- Chalcedonian and Monophysite communities each read the death toll as a verdict on the other's doctrine — hardening a division the empire was already struggling to manage.

Now

- During COVID-19 we watched medical, religious, and political authorities compete to supply meaning for the same event.
- Policy, again, tended to follow whichever narrative had won public trust — not simply whichever was most accurate.
- The Justinianic case suggests this isn't a modern, media-driven quirk. It's a recurring feature of how societies process collective fear.

IN CLOSING

The plague was never interpreted just once.

Procopius, John of Ephesus, Evagrius Scholasticus, and Gregory of Tours each shaped the same disaster into a story that suited their own community's claim to truth. Taken together, I don't think their disagreements are noise sitting on top of the real history — I think the disagreements are the history: a contest for legitimacy, fought in the language of disease and divine judgment.

Narratives of catastrophe are rarely neutral. Often, they're claims to power, wearing the mask of explanation.

Thank you