

Contagium, morbus, pestilentia, and Co.:

Framing with Epidemic Language by Latin Historians and Administrators

Sven Günther (Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China; svenguenther@nenu.edu.cn / sveneca@aol.com)

It has been frequently noted that ancient authors, and historiographers in particular, apply medical language to their narration aside from mere descriptions of illness, diseases, and epidemics, viz as characterizations and metaphors of persons, events, and historical developments. However, a comprehensive study on how exactly the communication and agenda setting by ancient historiographers through their use of epidemic language functioned, is still lacking. Especially the attempts of those authors to frame their intended or targeted audiences, and the intended or expected “responses” based on their audiences’ frames of experience and knowledge are of interest. In my paper, I will present my research results of an in-depth analysis of Latin historiography of the Late Republic and Early/High Empire, expanded on the analysis of the use of such language in the administrative sphere. Particularly by applying frame and framing theories, I shall show how exactly the communication between author and audience via these frames functioned. By discussing several examples, among them the famous Letter of Pliny the Younger to emperor Trajan on how to deal with the Christians (Plin. *epist.* 10.96), where disease language is used to describe the spread of Christianity, I will exemplify to what degree ancient writings were literature wherein terms from other spheres/disciplines were heavily loaded with meaning, opinions, and intentions. I will argue that this ancient framing with disease language should warn us when reading, or even using, such epidemic language outside the medical sphere it originally belongs to, nowadays and particularly in the present situation: For spread of epidemic language can be equally contagious and harmful.

Literature

Rodolfo Funari, L’immagine della *tabes* come metafora di corruzione nel linguaggio morale di Sallustio e della prosa Latina, *Athenaeum* 85/1 (1997), 207–214.

Hunter H. Gardner, *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Sven Günther, *Contagium, morbus, pestilentia* : 拉丁历史学家的流行语言 (*Contagium, morbus, pestilentia, and Co.: Epidemic Language in Latin Historians*), *Latinitas Sinica* 9 (2021), 108-126. (in Chinese; with English translation available via https://www.academia.edu/49256634/GUENTHER_contagium_morbus_pestilentia_Latinitas_Sinica_09_2021_shortened)

Brian Walters, *The Deaths of the Republic: Imagery of the Body Politic in Ciceronian Rome*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.