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Montanism's Origins in the Context of the Pandemic under Marcus Aurelius

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The New Prophecy originated in the Phrygian hinterland sometime in the middle or second half of the 160s CE; another possible, but less likely, date of origin is around 172 CE.[1] Thus, this study presupposes that the Phrygian prophetic movement emerged under the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (161–180 CE), that is, when a pandemic, the so-called Antonine Plague or Plague of Galen, raged from 165 CE onwards, at first from 165 to 168 CE, then flaring up again and again, e.g., in 189/190 CE and still in the 230s (see below).

The two events – the emergence of a prophetic movement rapidly spreading across the Roman empire and a pandemic raging through the same empire at the same time, harvesting a high death toll – have scarcely been correlated. This is surprising as several motives in the Montanist logia deal with health and illness (see part 2). The leading question will be: Does the contextualization of the early years of the New Prophecy movement within the disaster of the Antonine Plague enhance our understanding of their logia by casting additional light on them? Does this contextualization even help explain the emergence of this movement – at least partly? Correlations in time and space do not automatically indicate causality.

[1] See the appendix, below. A date before 170, yet after the 150s, was also suggested by, e.g., W. Tabbernee/P. Lampe, *Pepouza and Tymion: The Discovery and Archaeological Exploration of a Lost Ancient City and an Imperial Estate* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2008) 1, and already in his 1978 dissertation by W. Tabbernee, *The Opposition to Montanism from Church and State: A Study of the History and Theology of the Montanist Movement as Shown by the Writings and Legislation of the Orthodox Opponents of Montanism* (PhD diss.; Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1978) 757–781.

1 The Antonine plague

1.1 *The spread*

The infectious disease was first reported in 165 CE in Mesopotamia when Lucius Verus fought his war against the Parthians (165–167 CE).[2] Roman legions returning to the west spread the infection rapidly[3] – from the Euphrates and Tigris to (1) Antioch at the Orontes in Syria and from there to Egypt, (2) to the densely populated seaports of Smyrna and Ephesus, which were hooked up to Asia Minor's elaborated road system and therefore served as logistic hubs of the military. The road system enabled a quick spread of the disease to other Asia Minor *poleis* such as Hierapolis and Pergamon – already in 165 CE.

(3) From the Asia Minor Aegean seaports, the pathogen soon crossed the waters and reached Athens, from whence the densely populated capital city of Rome was hit hard in 166 CE. According to SHA *Marc.* 13.3–6; 17.2 (cf. 28.4),

> there was such a pestilence that the dead were removed in carts and waggons. About this time, also, the two emperors ratified certain very stringent laws on burial and tombs.[4] ... Thousands were carried off by the pestilence, including many nobles, for the most prominent of whom Antoninus erected statues. Such,

[2] K. Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [2]2019), attempts to identify a precursor of the Antonine Plague in Arabia (a deadly disease under Antoninus Pius in Arabia in 156–160 CE, which wiped out a whole town and infected "the whole land" for years). Harper uses SHA *Ant. Pius* 9.4 and a Sabaic inscription as evidence and presumes that the pathogen originated in Africa, with the disease having been smuggled "into the empire via the Red Sea axis".

[3] For the following sketch of the plague's spread, cf., e.g., J. Kobes, "'Pest' in der Hohen Kaiserzeit?", in M. Meier (ed.), *Pest: Die Geschichte eines Menschheitstraumas* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005) 66–77, map on p. 77; A. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (revised edition; London: Batsford, 1987) 149–159; R.J. Littman/M.L. Littman, "Galen and the Antonine Plague", *AJP* 94/3 (1973) 243–255; J.F. Gilliam, "The Plague under Marcus Aurelius", *AJP* 82/3 (1961) 225–251; C. Bruun, "The Antonine Plague and the 'Third-Century Crisis'", in O. Hekster et al., *Crises and the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire, Nijmegen, June 20–24, 2006* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 201–218; B. Doherty, *The Montanist Milieu: History and Historiography in the Study of Montanism* (PhD diss.; Sydney: Macquarie University, 2011) 212–217; Harper, *Fate*, especially 98–118.

[4] For the specifics, see below at n. 8–10.

> too, was his kindliness of heart that he had funeral ceremonies performed for the lower classes even at the public expense. … The plague destroyed thousands of civilians and soldiers.

Roman armies suffered huge losses from the pandemic (Eutropius 8.12.2; Jerome, *Chron.* 206–207[5]). Orosius (7.15.5–6; 7.27.7), although possibly exaggerating when writing in the fifth century about pagan calamities, still conveyed bitter truth:

> Such great pestilence devastated all Italy that everywhere estates, fields, towns were left deserted without cultivators or inhabitants and relapsed into ruins and woodland.[6] It is said that the Roman troops and all the legions stationed far and near in winter quarters were so depleted that the war against the Marcomanni, which broke out immediately, could not be carried on without a new levy of soldiers. … In the empire, during the fourth plague, under the rule of Marcus Antoninus, a pestilence spread over a great many provinces and the whole of Italy, including the city of Rome. It also attacked the Roman army, which was scattered along the distant frontiers in its various winter camps and made its dying members at once a prey to decay and worms.

Because cities with high population density, above all Rome, were pandemic hotspots – as were the legions in crowded quarters – people left Rome such as Galen who fled to Pergamum.[7] By 167 CE, the cemeteries were so overcrowded that an imperial edict prohibited illegal usage of other people's grave sites: "A body that has been delivered to a lawful sepulchre, i.e., covered with earth, must not be disturbed."[8] Accordingly, prices of tombs and funerals skyrocketed, which caused heirs not to use the mortician whom the testator had chosen for the funeral but to make cheaper arrangements. A rescript by Marcus Aurelius condoned this practice, although principally it was not right to go against a testator's

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[5] Ed. Helm. Cf. Birley, *Marcus*, 156; Harper, *Fate*, 99, 112; W. Eck, "Die Seuche unter Mark Aurel: Ihre Auswirkungen auf das Heer", in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della* "*peste antonina*" (Bari: Edipuglia, 2012) 63–77.

[6] Farmland was not tilled. Famine afflicted many regions, as Galen (6.749, ed. Kühn) affirmed. Cf. further D. Gourevitch, *Limos kai Loimos: A Study of the Galenic Plague* (Paris: Bocard, 2013).

[7] Cf. Birley, *Marcus*, 149–150; S.P. Mattern, *The Prince of Medicine: Galen in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 187–189.

[8] The shortage of burial space (see likewise *ILS* 7215a in n. 16, below) also triggered an imperial rescript that overrode a previous ruling: "If the monument has not yet been used anyone may sell it or give it away." For both imperial documents, see Birley, *Marcus*, 150–151.

will, the emperor admitted.[9] Another rescript, reacting to the high deathrate, excused those who were summoned to court but attended a funeral instead at the same time.[10] Moreover, because of the plague, the government had to deal with its own financial crisis, caused by less income from taxes and imperial estates. As the armies had been gravely decimated by the plague, expensive recruiting of new legions and auxiliary troops became necessary, aggravating the financial crisis.[11] By 168 CE, Marcus Aurelius even auctioned treasures of the palace to raise funds (SHA *Marc.* 17.4–5).

(4) From Italy where, in the winter of 168/169 CE, Aquileia, for instance, experienced a severe outbreak among the troops,[12] and the number of eastern immigrants (from Tyre) in Puteoli dramatically declined so that they had problems continuing to finance their station there,[13] the pathogen spread south to North Africa and (5) north, for example, to Trier in Gaul and the shores of the Rhine,[14] to the Danube[15] and beyond the Danube to Transylvania[16] or to the area of today's Bavarian Rosenheim.[17] (6) It even reached the shores of the North Sea and Britannia where legions had returned from the Parthian War.

Eventually the lethal disease grasped the entire empire. Unhindered traffic within the empire and a long incubation time of twelve to fourteen days,[18] allowing infected people to

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[9] See Birley, *Marcus*, 151.
[10] See Birley, *Marcus*, 151 with note 27 (*Digest* 47.12.3–4; 11.7.39; 11.7.14.14; 11.7.6.1; 2.4.3).
[11] See above and Birley, *Marcus*, 159; Harper, *Fate*, 112.
[12] Galen 19.18 (ed. Kühn); Littman/Littman, "Galen", 244.
[13] *IG* 14.830 (*OGIS* 595) from 174 CE: ταύτης (sc. στατιῶνος) πάλαι μὲν ἐπεμελοῦντο οἱ ἐν Ποτιόλοις κατοικοῦντες Τύριοι {οι} πολλοὶ ὄντες καὶ πλούσιοι· νῦν δὲ εἰς ὀλίγους ἡμᾶς περιέστη τὸν ἀριθμόν. Harper, *Fate*, 100, erroneously locates them in Ostia.
[14] Ammianus Marcellinus 23.6.24: "The incurable disease, in the time of Verus and Marcus Antoninus, polluted the whole world from the borders of Persia to the Rhine and Gaul with contagion and death."
[15] At the Danube, the raging plague killed a large number of victims already in 168 CE. The Legion VII Claudia at the Danube, in 169 CE, needed twice as many new recruits as in normal times. Marcus Aurelius himself died at the Danube in 180 CE, either from or with the plague. See Birley, *Marcus*, 159, 209–210, 249–250.
[16] *ILS* 7215a (167 CE). An association of Jupiter Cernenus in Alburnus Maior (Transylvania) shrank from 54 to 17 members, which translates into a death toll of 69 percent. Even if the excess mortality may have been under 69 percent, the plague's death toll overwhelmed the association: it ran out of funds for more funerals as well as loculi for burials (... *neque funeraticis sufficerent neque loculum [h]aberet* ...).
[17] The funerary inscription *CIL* 3.5567 (182 CE) presents a list of family members who died from the plague.
[18] WHO, https://www.who.int/teams/health-product-and-policy-standards/standards-and-specifications/vaccine-standardization/smallpox. See also Harper, *Fate*, 104: incubation time of around twelve days.

continue to travel thereby carrying the virus other places, fuelled the rapid spread. The plague hopelessly overextended any established coping mechanisms designed to manage catastrophes. It also overextended the financial means of many families who had a hard time paying for enormous funeral costs (see above). Galen emphasized the unprecedented severity of the disease: At Aquileia, "the plague descended as never before", he wrote, "we, the many, survived with difficulty over a long time, while most died" (κατέσκηψεν ὁ λοιμὸς ὡς οὔπω πρότερον ... ἡμᾶς δὲ τοὺς πολλοὺς μόλις ἐν χρόνῳ πολλῷ διασωθῆναι, πλείστων ἀπολλυμένων, 19.18, ed. Kühn).

1.2 *Pandemic waves*

When the infection had immunized large parts of the populace the incidence temporarily decreased at the beginning of the 170s, until the disease flared up again in many regions, showing the waves of a pandemic without being exterminated. In 179 CE, for example, papyri document a high death toll in Egypt (see below). In 180 CE, Marcus Aurelius died from or with the disease at the Danube (see n. 15). In 182 CE, in today's Upper Bavaria, the plague killed a whole family.[19] Sometime between 182 and 184 CE, in Virunum (Noricum) in today's Austria, many people participated in a Mithras cult assembly who after a short while passed away; the inscription mentions the *mortalitas* expressly.[20] In about 189/190 CE, at least Rome and Italy experienced the severest flareup, with sometimes 2000 deaths per day in Rome,[21] and in the 230s CE (and later) the disease recurred as epidemic as well.[22]

[19] *CIL* 3.5567.
[20] *AE* 1996.1189; Kobes, "Pest", 68.
[21] For the plague under Commodus, see Dio Cassius 73.14.3; Herodianus 1.12.1–2 (documenting, among others, that the pathogen was considered airborne by the contemporaries); Littman/Littman, "Galen", 243, 255.
[22] Kobes, "Pest", 68.

1.3 *Medical aspects*

As symptoms Galen[23] describes internal and external pustules. Externally, black pustules will have spread all over the body by the ninth day on average, when the crisis of the infection usually begins. On the twelfth day, patients may get out of bed again if they survived the crisis. The rash eventually scabs and falls off. Fever, often diarrhoea, cough and upset stomach/vomiting come with the disease, as well as stinking (δυσώδης) breath (9.357**)**.[24]

The modern diagnosis[25] best fitting the syndrome is smallpox.[26] This means, people were facing the highly contagious *variola* virus. It is concentrated in the itching and oozing pustules and scabs so that even clothes and bedlinens can be contagious (smear infection). The air that patients cough up or breath out is contagious as well (airborne droplet infection). Initial symptoms are flu-like: fever, headache and backpain, at times strong stomach pain; patients feel severely ill. The rash especially affects the face, arms, and legs; mucus membranes can show pustules. Delusions, hallucinations, and confusion can occur.[27]

The virus's airborne spread matches a story in the Historia Augusta (SHA *Verus* 8,1–2). According to a rumour, Lucius Verus's soldiers, looting an Apollo temple in a city at the Euphrates (probably in Nisibis) or the Tigris (Seleukia),[28] damaged a golden casket so that

[23] For the following, see especially Galen 4.788; 5.115; 9.357; 10.360–367; 12.191; 17/1.709–710; 17/1.885–886; 17/2.683 (ed. Kühn).
[24] Aelius Aristides (*Hieroi Logoi* 299–300 [Jebb page], ed. Dindorf 475–476) also mentions feverish dreams/visions, loss of appetite, and gall bladder problems. Against the latter he received an enema with Attic honey (κλύσμα ... μέλιτος Ἀττικοῦ, καὶ ἐγένετο κάθαρσις χολῆς, 300.25–26 [Jebb page], ed. Dindorf 476). The appetite returned with a diet comprising goose liver (ἦπαρ, οἶμαι, χηνὸς μετὰ τὴν πολλὴν ἀπόρρησιν πρὸς ἅπαντα τὰ σιτία) and later pork (300.28–29 [Jebb page], ed. Dindorf 476).
[25] See, e.g., S.P. Mattern, "The Art of Medicine: Galen and His Patients", *The Lancet* 378 (2011) 478–479; Kobes, "Pest", 68.
[26] For a medically informed convincing argumentation, see Littman/Littman, "Galen", 243–255. However, most recently this diagnosis has been contested by T. Newfield/A. Duggan/H. Poinar, "Smallpox's Antiquity in Doubt", *JRA* 35/2 (2022) 897–913 (https://doi.org/10.1017/S1047759422000290). Whatever the scholarly debate to be expected will show, our paper does not depend on an exact diagnosis of the pathogen. No matter what the pathogen was, the "Antonine Plague was a mortality event on a scale the empire had never experienced before" (Harper, *Fate*, 114, and see below).
[27] However, to disappoint the reader up front, this paper will not argue that such hallucinations were at the root of Montanist ecstatic prophesying.
[28] Birley, *Marcus*, 149, votes for Seleukia on the Tigris.

deadly air evaded from this Pandora box to infect the entire *orbis*, including the Parthians. The rumour shows that people were aware of the airborne spread of the pathogen.

1.4 *Mortality*

Regarding mortality, Littman & Littman[29] argued an average excess mortality rate of 7 to 10 percent of the empire's population. This translates into about 3.5 to 5 million plague-related deaths during the outbreak of 165/166–168 CE (or 7 to 10 million if the second severe outbreak in 189/190 CE is included). For crowded cities and armies in populous camps, they presumed about 13 to 15 percent, knowing that demographic hypotheses for the Roman empire are shaky. However, they appear to be right when considering their estimates "conservative". When considering numbers from modern populations without smallpox immunization, we need to increment the figures: While 30 percent of the smallpox cases are usually fatal, 25 to 50 percent of a non-immunized population die, not just 7 to 10 percent or 13 to 15 percent, as Littman & Littman cautiously presumed.[30] Other historical studies on the Antonine Plague infer a population mortality of 20 to >30 percent.[31]

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[29] "Galen", 244, 254–255. They counterbalance J.F. Gilliam, "The Plague under Marcus Aurelius", *AJP* 82 (1961) 228–229, who – against previous scholarship – downplayed the importance of the Antonine Plague, holding that later sources such as the *Historia Augusta* (SHA) greatly exaggerated the death toll. Gilliam speculated that the mortality rate of the Antonine Plague was only 1 to 2 percent of the population, or one million deaths of excess mortality.

[30] Modern numbers from populations without immunization: Usually 30 percent of the smallpox cases are fatal, that is, <30 percent of the population die of smallpox (see, e.g., WHO, https://www.who.int/teams/health-product-and-policy-standards/standards-and-specifications/vaccine-standardization/smallpox). By way of example, 25 to 50 percent, in some areas 90 percent, of the North American indigenous people were wiped out when confronted with the virus by European immigrants (B.I. Tshisuaka, "Pocken [Variola, Blattern]", in W.E. Gerabek/B.D. Haage/G. Keil/W. Wegner (ed.), *Enzyklopädie Medizingeschichte* [Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2007] 1171–1172; G. Lewy, "Were American Indians the Victims of Genocide?", *History News Network* 22, January 2007). The regional variance was caused by different pathogen loads, with humid and hot areas having heavier loads (M. Livi Bacci, "The Depopulation of Hispanic America after the Conquest", *Population and Development Review* 32 [2006] 199–232, on p. 225). For comparison, regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, <0.7 percent of the population died from the virus and <5 percent of those who were infected died (John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality).

[31] Harper, *Fate*, 108, 110, presumes a case fatality rate of 30 to 40 percent and an infection rate of about 70 percent of a population. Based on these figures, 21 (= 70 x 0.3) to 28 percent (= 70 x 0.4) of a population would have died from the plague. However, on p. 115, Harper seems to backpaddle towards the more conservative estimates of Littman & Littman: "a guess around 10 percent, if we truly intend the imperial population as a whole, seems prudent, maybe twice that [= 20 percent] in the areas most devastated by the pandemic. If the

Correspondingly, in *Lydia*, in the second half of the 160s, the number of funerary inscriptions almost doubled.[32] In *Egypt*, according to administrative papyri, the death toll appeared extraordinarily high as well. In the settlement of Soknopaiou Nesos, for instance, 32 percent of the male taxpayers died during the first two months of the year 179 CE.[33] Survivors, already weakened by the illness and burdened by taxes, either fled from their communities where they were taxed, or they were drawn into a socio-economic spiral downward. For the year 168/169 CE, a papyrus from Thmouis shows by way of example how the social and administrative organisation of entire communities could collapse: A criminal gang killed many inhabitants of Kerkenouphis, their possessions were burnt, others were killed by the plague (ἄλλους τῷ λοιμικῷ καταστήματι τετελ[ευτηκέναι]), and a small rest fled

virus did carry off 7 to 8 of the empire's 75 million souls, it was, in absolute terms, the worst disease event in human history up to that time." Other historians' estimates of the death toll of the population range from 20 to >30 percent. *20 to 30 percent:* D.W. Rathbone, "Villages, Land, and Population in Greco-Roman Egypt", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 36 (1990) 103–142; *20 to 25 percent:* Y. Zelener, "Genetic Evidence, Density Dependence, and Epidemiological Models of the 'Antonine Plague'", in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della "peste antonina*" (Bari: Edipuglia, 2012) 167–178 (22–24 percent); W.V. Harris, "The Great Pestilence and the Complexities of the Antonine-Severan Economy", in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della "peste antonina*", 331–338 (22 percent); W. Scheidel, "A Model of Demographic and Economic Change in Roman Egypt after the Antonine Plague", *JRA* 15 (2002) 97–114 (25 percent); *25 to >30 percent:* Kobes, "Pest", 76 (25–30 percent); W.M. Jongman, "Roman Economic Change and the Antonine Plague: Endogenous, Exogenous, or What?", in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della "peste antonina*", 253–263 (25–33 percent); R.R. Paine/G.R. Storey, "The Alps as a Barrier to Epidemic Disease during the Republican Period: Implications for the Dynamic of Disease in Rome", in E. Lo Cascio (ed.), *L'impatto della "peste antonina*", 179–191 (>30 percent).

[32] Cf. R. MacMullen, "Frequency of Inscriptions in Roman Lydia", *ZPE* 65 (1986) 237–238; Y. Broux/W. Clarysse, "Two Greek Funerary Stelae from Lydia and the Antonine Plague", *Tyche* 24 (2009) 27–33, especially on p. 28. However, in other regions, the impact of the plague could be felt in different, sometimes contrariant, ways: (a) In marble-rich areas of Phrygia, marble production and epigraphic activity appear to have stagnated between 166 and 173 CE (see R.P. Duncan-Jones, "The Impact of the Antonine Plague", *JRA* 9 [1996] 108–136, on pp. 129–130). For an abrupt decrease of dated documents in general (e.g., building inscriptions, military diplomas, papyri), (b) a sudden collapse of silver mining, (c) which triggered a temporary monetary crisis, even a standstill of silver coinage production for several years in various regions (Alexandria: from 170/171 to 179/180 CE; Syria: from 169 to 177 CE; Palestine: from 166/167 to 175/176 CE), and (d) inflated nominal prices of wheat and other products, see Harper, *Fate*, 112–114, 116. (e) For famine, see n. 6, above. – For the impact specifically on Egypt, see most recently L. Oddo/C. Lagazio/A. Filippini, "Pandemics Are Similar, Societies Are Not: Roman Egypt's Reaction to the Antonine Plague", 24 January 2023 (online: https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4332523).

[33] A death toll of 78 among originally 244 men (= 32 percent); papyrus *SB* 16.12816 (Greek text online: https://papyri.info/ddbdp/sb;16;12816). Cf., e.g., Kobes, "Pest", 70; Harper, *Fate*, 111–112. The 78 include those who died of a natural death, which pushes the plague-related fatalities under 30 percent of the male, i.e., least vulnerable, subpopulation of 244. Although such snapshots are not representative, the percentage concurs with the mortality data mentioned above.

from the locality.[34] According to Pseudo-Galen (14.281, ed. Kühn, found in the Nile delta), the plague, "like some beast … spreads over whole cities and destroys them badly" (ὥσπερ γάρ τι θηρίον καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ λοιμὸς οὐκ ὀλίγους τινὰς, ἀλλὰ καὶ πόλεις ὅλας ἐπινεμόμενος διαφθείρει κακῶς).

As for *Athens,* it speaks volumes that Marcus Aurelius lowered the bars for becoming a member of the prestigious political council of the Areopagus.[35] Apparently, the rapidly mounting mortality rate and resulting emigration to flee the disease increasingly burdened the remaining well-to-do persons in the city so that they were reluctant to take over public functions, which carried financial obligations. In the years 167/168, 169/170, *λ* and 171/172 CE, the costly office of Archon was vacant. The lists of *archontes* reported ἀναρχία for these three years.[36] "Happy they who died in the plague!", an Athenian orator lamented over the misery of the survivors before Marcus Aurelius (μακάριοι οἱ ἐν τῷ λοιμῷ ἀποθνήσκοντες, in Philostratus, *Vit. soph*. 2.561).

1.5 *Pagan religious responses*

The resulting anxiety of the empire's populace was fertile soil for religious spirituality, for prophets and oracles.[37] Sensing this need of the people, Marcus Aurelius not only called the physician Galen into the imperial staff at Aquileia (168 CE) but also the Egyptian priest

[34] *Papyrus Thmouis* 1.104 (Greek text online: https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.thmouis;1;1). Cf. Kobes, "Pest", 70; Harper, *Fate*, 111.
[35] Epigraphical Museum Athens Inv. No. 13366; J.H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1989) No. 184; *SEG* 29.127.57–81; Kobes, "Pest", 71.
[36] Kobes, "Pest", 71.
[37] Especially Apolline oracles were in demand (examples below). Cf. Harper, *Fate*, 101: "The outburst of Apolline religion generated by the Antonine Plague is utterly unlike anything else in the records of ancient epigraphy."

Harnouphis to fight the disease with religious rituals.[38] In Italy, as Lucian (*Alex*. 36) gibes, an Asia Minor prophet Alexander, from Abonoteichos, became popular, sending

> oracle mongers everywhere in the Roman empire, warning the cities to be on their guard against plagues (λοιμοί) and conflagrations and earthquakes; he promised that he would himself afford ... infallible aid so that none of these calamities should befall them. There was one oracle ... that he despatched to all the nations during the pestilence. It was but a single verse:
>
> Phoebus, the god unshorn,[39]
>
> keeps off the plague's mist.
>
> Φοῖβος ἀκειρεκόμης λοιμοῦ νεφέλην ἀπερύκει.
>
> This verse was to be seen everywhere written over doorways as a charm against the plague. However, ... by some chance the houses on which the verse was inscribed were depopulated particularly! ... Perhaps people neglected precautions because of their confidence in the line and lived too carelessly, giving the oracle no assistance against the disease because they were going to have the syllables to defend them and 'unshorn Phoebus' to drive away the plague with his arrows![40]

The expression "mist of the plague" again suggests that people were aware of the airborne nature of the pathogen. Lucian (*Alex.* 38) continues by showing a competition between Alexander and other movements such as the Christian faith:

> He established a celebration of mysteries, with torchlight ceremonies and priestly offices, which was to be held annually, for three days in succession, in perpetuity. On the first day ... there was a proclamation, worded as follows: 'If any atheist or Christian or Epicurean has come to spy upon the rites, let him be off ... .' Then, at the very outset, there was an expulsion, in which he took the lead, saying 'Out with the Christians', and the whole multitude chanted in response, 'Out with the Epicureans!'.

[38] *AE* 1934.245; SHA *Marc.* 13.1–2 (other priests beside Harnouphis); cf. Birley, *Marcus*, 157. Regarding Galen, see *IGR* 1.482 and Galen 19.18 (ed. Kühn).
[39] = Apollo; Hom., *Il.* 1–43; 2.68.
[40] For other apotropaic inscriptions against the plague displayed on walls, see Harper, *Fate*, 100–101 with n. 67.

Being in competition with the Christians, Alexander (Lucian, *Alex*. 40) even created formulations similar to Montanus's introductory formula. He claimed that he had Pythagoras's soul and

> the prophecy [of this soul] is an efflux of the heavenly mind;
> and the *Father* [Zeus] sent it as helper of the good men,
> and then to *God* it is thrown again with *God's* thunderbolt.
> ἡ δὲ προφητείη δίης φρενός ἐστιν ἀπορρώξ.
> καί μιν ἔπεμψε πατὴρ ἀγαθῶν ἀνδρῶν ἐπαρωγόν·
> καὶ πάλιν ἐς Διὸς εἶσι Διὸς βληθεῖσα κεραυνῷ.

Montanus's logia 6 and 5 read,[41] "… I, the Lord *God* the *Father*, have come", "dwelling in a human being" (see also logion 4).

Especially the *Asia Minor* population consulted oracles hoping for advice of how to cope with the plague.[42] A long oracle from the Apollo sanctuary of Klaros gives us a glimpse at this religiosity. It is worth looking at it because the pre-Christian Montanus appears to have been an Apollo priest as well.[43]

A desperate delegation from plague-stricken Pergamum travelled about 170 km south to Klaros, where the emissaries were initiated and introduced into the subterranean grotto. In hexameters, the acting Apollo priest gave them wordy advice that the "council and δῆμος" of Pergamum later publicly displayed on stelae in the agora and the sanctuaries of Pergamum.[44]

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[41] All sayings of the New Prophecy in this article are quoted using the new classification of the Montanist logia by W. Tabbernee, "The Montanist Oracles Reexamined", in U.E. Eisen/H.E. Mader (ed.), *Talking God in Society: Multidisciplinary (Re)constructions of Ancient (Con)texts* (Festschrift Peter Lampe, vol. 2; NTOA 120/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht/Brill, 2020) 317–343. The new system encompasses more logia (thirty-three) than R.E. Heine's edition, *The Montanist Oracles and Testimonia* (NAPSMS 14; Macon: Mercer University Press/Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989). For the system's main advantages, see Tabbernee, "Montanists Oracles", 331–332.
[42] Kobes, "Pest", 69, 72–74.
[43] *Dialogue between a Montanist and an Orthodox* 4.5–6; cf. Ps-Didymus, *Trin*. 3.41.3. Furthermore Tabbernee/Lampe, *Pepouza and Tymion*, 4.
[44] The inscription in R. Merkelbach/J. Stauber (ed.), *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten, vol. 1: Die Westküste Kleinasiens von Knidos bis Ilion* (Stuttgart/Leipzig: Teubner, 1998) 575–579.

To motivate Apollo to shoot arrows at the plague[45] – people often personified the plague – the priest proclaimed:

> ... I [Apollo] truthfully ... can name you a remedy/defense (ἄλκαρ) so that the people ... won't be much longer worn out (τρύομαι) by the painful disease (ἀργαλέη νοῦσος). This will please my son [Asclepios of Pergamum].

What is the remedy? The oracle advises the leading emissary to divide up the city's ephebes into four groups and to let them sing hymns to several deities: Zeus, Dionysos, Athena, and Asclepios, Apollo's "beloved son" (ἐμὸν φίλον υἱέα; cf. Mark 1:11). In the following week, sacrifices should be offered to these four deities on the "altars" (βωμοί). At the sacrificial banquets, at each "libation" (λοιβή), these gods should be "implored" (αἰτέω) to find a "good cure" (ἄκος ἐσθλόν) against the "plague" (λοιμός) so that it goes far away into other regions, preferably to lands of strangers (sic).

Ironically, Apollo's remedy was to tell the Pergamon delegation that they needed to ask four *other* gods for a cure when sacrificing to *them.* The Apollo of Klaros apparently was at the end of his wits. By letting Pergamum prepare sacrifices to other deities, the Apollo priest made sure that, if the offerings had no effect, Apollo was not to blame but others.

Something similar can be observed in another oracle of the Apollo of Klaros.[46] This time a delegation from Hierapolis in the Lykos Valley came to Klaros to ask for guidance in the pandemic. The Apollo of Klaros again recommends dedicating elaborate sacrifices (ἑκατόμβαι), banquets (εἰλαπίναι) and drink offerings (λοιβαί) to other deities – among others to Gaia, Demeter, the "gods of the underworld" (ἐνερτερίοι[47] θεοί) and even "the deceased under the earth" (ἥρωες χθόνιοι).

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[45] Cf. Hom., *Il.* 1.44–52, and Ps 7:14.
[46] Merkelbach/Stauber, *Steinepigramme I*, 259–261.
[47] = ἐνέρτεροι.

In addition, the Apollo of Klaros orders the inhabitants of Hierapolis to be mindful (μέδομαι) of himself and, in front of each city gate, to establish a sacred precinct for the Carian Apollo[48] with a statue of the god shooting arrows at diseases.

Especially "the goddesses of death" (κῆρες) should be appeased (μειλίσσομαι). However, if this turns out unsuccessful and they arrive nonetheless (ἀπὸ ... ἱκνέομαι = ἀφικνέομαι),[49] Hierapolis should send choirs of boys and girls to serve at the Klaros sanctuary and bring products for libations and offerings (ἑκατόμβαι) with them, that is, herds of oxen. "For I exceedingly often saved you and never received" appropriate offerings, Apollo complains. Hierapolis must pay – for questionable guidance.

Again, that not only Apollo was supposed to be honoured but also other deities be appeased shows the gravity of the health disaster. Contrary to Pergamum, in Hierapolis the "gods of the underworld", "the deceased under the earth", and "the goddesses of death" were to be placated, showing how fatal the plague was.[50]

The Carian Apollos addressing the city of Hierapolis gave a mythological reason for the plague. Because Apollos once had shot the Python dragon, his mother – mother earth/χθών – now takes revenge.[51] Therefore, the Apollo adherents in Hierapolis need to

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[48] The Carian Apollo appears to be an offshoot of the Apollo of Klaros in Caria. See Merkelbach/Stauber, *Steinepigramme I*, 261.

[49] ἀπὸ κῆρες ἵκωνται (aor.). I deviate from the interpretation of Merkelback/Stauber, *Steinepigramme I*, 260: "Aber wenn ihr die Totengeister gnädig gestimmt habt und sie weggegangen (*sic*) sind..." I suggest: "But when – although you appeased (them) (Med.) – the goddesses of death arrive..."

[50] By way of example, a soldier returning from the Parthian war died in Hierapolis (*IG* V.1 816). In general, Hierapolis with its hot springs was known for attracting patients beyond medical treatment. They moved to Hierapolis to die, with the vast necropoleis testifying to this; they extended over 2 km and comprised more than 2000 monuments as well as a plethora of inscriptions. Cf., e.g., F. d'Andria, *Hierapolis in Phrygien: Ein archäologischer Führer* (Istanbul: Ege Yayinlari, 2003) 48–62, 66–69, 86–87, 191–192, 205–209. The topic of death was also present in the excavated Hades temple of Hierapolis, the Ploutonion, which diffused toxic fumes (see Strabo 13.4.14; F. d'Andria, *Hierapolis*, 142–143).

[51] However, other explanations were popular as well. For human, especially Christian, maleficent magic as cause of the plague, see, e.g., Tertullian, *Apol*. 40 ("... if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, 'Away with the Christians to the lion!'"). For the possibility that particularly Montanist Christians could have been suspected of plague-triggering sorcery because of phenomenological similarities between contemporary magical practices and behaviour attributed to Montanists, see A. Wypustek/I. Donkow, "Christians and the Plague in the 2nd Century Asia Minor", *Palamedes* 1/1 (2006) 123–132; A. Wypustek, "Magic, Montanism, Perpetua, and the Severan Persecution", *VC* 51/3 (1997) 276–297.

placate her with complicated atoning sacrifices. They also are asked to honour "men who did good deeds". This would make the Apollo adherents "wealthier (ἀφνειότεροι) and healthier/safer (σωότεροι)".

In other words, a lot of cultic fuss and effort as well as honour/shame posturing but no medical insights that could have helped, not even social distancing or airing stuffy rooms, although people had a hunch that infection with the plague was airborne (see above). Apollo admits that this plague is difficult to cure, in other words "deadly" (λοιμὸς δυσαλθής). The people of Hierapolis are "harmed/destroyed" (κηραίνω) by its "accursed miseries" (οὐλόμεναι δυηπαθίαι). However, not only they but also "many cities and peoples are grieving" (ἀχεύω) under the "anger (ὀδυσημοσύνη)[52] of the gods" and their "painful wrath" (χόλος ἀλγινόεις), the oracle explains.

However, to be fair to the Apollo of Klaros, in another oracle, he did give medically relevant advice, ordering the plague-stricken inhabitants of a small Lydian town, Caesarea Trocetta, to sprinkle their houses with clean water purified by steam of sulphur (fumigation, θεειῶσαι). Apollo adds that in the countryside more people have not been infected (ἀνούτητοί γε φῶτες ... πέδῳ), and he hopes – not quite selflessly – that they can carry on farming so that their products can be used for sacrifices. To keep these rural people healthy and their fields tilled, he advises to erect an apotropaic statue of Phoibos with his bow "in the middle of the field" (μέσσον ... πέδου).[53]

The inscription suggests that small country towns such as Pepouza and Tymion could have been used as relatively safe havens by the three founders of the New Prophecy.

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[52] Cf. ὀδύσσομαι.

[53] The inscription in Merkelbach/Stauber, *Steinepigramme I*, 396–399, verses 20–28. Furthermore, on an apotropaic amulet from London, Apollo appears to have advised against kissing to prevent contamination. See C.P. Jones, "An Amulet from London and Events Surrounding the Antonine Plague", *JRA* 29 (2016) 469–472.

Avoiding crowded cities was a smart move that Galen also chose when fleeing Rome (see above).[54]

1.6 *General helplessness*

As the cults were more or less helpless and at the end of their wits, so were the doctors, the two emperors, and the administrative institutions. The latter had no idea about measures to contain the plague – contrary to Tiberius one-and-a-half centuries earlier when a contagious skin disease had been imported from Asia to Italy. Curiously, it only spread among the upper classes where the *cotidiana oscula* as daily hello kisses were popular. An edict by Tiberius prohibited this unsanitary custom.[55]

As for the physicians, as soon as they noticed that they could not heal their patients or contain the plague, they "gradually withdrew" (οἱ ἰατροὶ ἀφίσταντο) from treatment, writes Aelius Aristides of Smyrna in his *Hieroi Logoi*. He claims that he himself, all his servants, and almost his entire neighbourhood fell ill in a short time, with the physicians' hope dwindling.[56]

Masses of people died prematurely. Entire regions were deserted with people fleeing them and leaving the dead behind. The emperor, instead of being able to pose as salvific *pater patriae*, spent years at the borders in warfare. His administration only could repair some socio-economic consequences of the pandemic (see above) but was unable to contain it in any way. Salvation had to be found elsewhere. Spirituality boomed. Old and new religions increasingly competed.[57]

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[54] For other responses of Apollo to emissaries of various cities, see Harper, *Fate*, 328 n.68.
[55] Suet., *Tib.* 34; cf. Plin., *HN* 26.1-4.
[56] See *Hieroi Logoi* 299.10–34 [Jebb page], ed. Dindorf 475–476.
[57] Cf. Kobes, "Pest", 76: Die Menschen "suchten das Unglück individuell und zugleich mit erprobten Mitteln zu bewältigen. Dazu gehörten religiöse Praktiken und eine verstärkte Spiritualität, und wenn sich das Miteinander von alten und neuen Religionen im Reich seit dieser Zeit zunehmend als Wettbewerb begreifen lässt, so war die Seuche der 160er Jahre gewiss ein auslösender Faktor für diese Entwicklung."

2 The oracles and the plague

Several Montanist oracles touch upon the topic of health and illness, gaining a clearer profile when seen against the backdrop of the Antonine plague. What happens when we start the experiment of looking at the logia through the lens of those who suffered through a deadly pandemic?

2.1. *Febres – fever attacks*

Logion 25 holds that it is better to die as martyr than in bed *(in lectulis)* or with fevers *(febribus mollibus)*:

> Choose to die not in comfortable beds nor in miscarriages and moderate[58] fevers (*febribus mollibus*) but in martyrdoms, so that the one who suffered for you may be rendered honour (anonymous author quoted in Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4b).

> If you should die for God in the manner the Paraclete advises, not in moderate[58] fevers and in beds, but in martyrdoms, [and] if you take up your cross and follow the Lord, as he himself commands, your blood is the whole key to Paradise (anonymous author quoted in Tertullian, *An.* 55.5).

Mollis as attribute to fever is best translated as "moderate fevers", because of an illuminating remark by Galen (17/1.885, ed. Kühn). Those affected with the plague, he observed, "appeared neither hot nor burnt to excess" (οὐδὲ θερμοὶ καὶ διακαεὶς[59] ἐνεφαίνοντο) when one touched their skin, "yet inside, they were being violently heated up to excess" (καίτοι τά γ' ἔνδον ἰσχυρῶς διακαιόμενοι). In other words, if the Antonine Plague caused these fevers, that is, "moderate fevers" in the eyes of only superficial observers, then it becomes

[58] Instead of "susceptible", which Tabbernee, "Montanists Oracles", 339 No. 25, proposes.
[59] Kühn erroneously uses a circumflex in his edition.

understandable why the logion considers such fevers fatal. Otherwise, moderate fevers usually are not lethal.

Tertullian may, or may not, here quote a logion from the times of severe outbreaks of the plague in 165–168 CE or 189/190 CE; he indeed knows logia of the Phrygian founders (see log. 13, but also 28–30). Therefore, it is hardly verifiable that logion 25 could not have been created before the first decade of the third century.[60] Conversely, it cannot be excluded that logion 25 – and other logia quoted by Tertullian (below) – may have originated in North Africa where the pandemic also spread (see above). The plague, even in the third century, repeatedly flared up regionally (see above). In other words, methodologically, we need not determine a particular date for a logion to claim that we can hear an echo of the plague in it. In the timespan from 165 CE to the early third century, the plague repeatedly and in many places beleaguered the populace – and could have resounded in Montanist logia of *any* providence in this timeframe.

2.2 *Praise of martyrdom in the light of the plague's death toll*

A second aspect of logion 25 is relevant for our topic. Not only this logion but also logia 23 and 24 praise readiness for martyrdom. According to logion 23,[61] being "publicly exposed" and shamed in the "public arena" "produces glory". "Authoritative power is being generated while you are being stared at by humankind." Logion 24[62] informs that those who run away from persecution are stigmatized in the eyes of the new prophets (*si et Spiritum quis agnoverit, audiet fugitivos denotantem*). Readiness for death by martyrdom becomes a group

[60] *Pace* Tabbernee, "Montanist Oracles", 332, 328–329.
[61] A logion of an anonymous author in Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4.
[62] Logion alluded to by Tertullian, *Fug.* 11.3.

norm – also in other Christian circles[63] – of which even the emperor in his *Meditations* was aware.[64]

Against the backdrop of the deadly disease, whose waves raged through the empire across decades, the new prophets' urge to become martyr heroes is put into a slightly different light. Not just the tradition of glorious martyrdoms of apostles such as Peter and Paul and the imagined eternal reward for the sacrifice of one's own life for Christ's sake (e.g., *1 Clem* 5.4; 6.1–2)[65] motivated a positive attitude towards martyrdom, but also the plague's horrendous and unprecedented death toll of about 20 to 30 percent[66] of the populace had the potential to trigger a mentality along the lines of "As I have an abnormally high risk of dying in the next months anyway, I may as well die as a hero in faith, giving meaning to my passing away, instead of suffering an ordinary death in bed" (*in lectulis*). A devastating plague, like a war, certainly lowers the threshold for imagining death breathing down one's

[63] In the mid 160s, see, e.g., Justin's trial in the *Acts of Justin* and, in the first half of the 180s, Apollonius's trial in the *Acts of Apollonius;* P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress/London: T & T Clark International, 2003) 257–260, 321–329, et al. See also the martyrs of Lyon in 177 CE (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.1). For more intensive persecutions of Christians under Marcus Aurelius, see I. Ramelli in this volume. The emperor actively sought out Christians and thus deviated from the legal practice since Trajan. Trajan had decreed in Pliny, *Ep*. 10.97: "No search should be made for these people." Marcus Aurelius's administration, however, apparently considered the Christians a danger to the empire. Cf. Celsus in Origen, *Cels*. 8.69 (ὑμῶν δὲ κἂν πλανᾶταί τις ἔτι λανθάνων, ἀλλὰ ζητεῖται πρὸς θανάτου δίκην); Melito in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.5–11.

[64] Marcus Aurelius alludes to the Christian readiness for death as group norm in *Meditations* 11.3: "How wonderful is that soul which is ready, if it must be at this very moment released from the body … This readiness must come from a specific decision, and not out of sheer *parataxis* like the Christians." *Parataxis* means that the Christian readiness for martyrdom is not based on a choice by the individual but on a choice "instilled into them: … they were *trained* to die", as Birley (*Marcus*, 154; emphasis Birley) interprets this text of the *Meditations*, based on parallel usage of *parataxis* (contra the traditional translation of "obstinacy"). His interpretation concurs with what we just called group norm. For the Christians' "contempt of death", see also Galen, *Fr*. (b), in R.R. Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949) 65 (Galen also observed a number of Christians' sexual abstinence and "self-control in matters of food and drink", which are verbalized in Montanist logia following below). However, the Montanist praise of readiness for martyrdom did not imply a "voluntary martyrdom" that deliberately provoked one's own death; see W. Tabbernee, "Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom", *Colloq* 17 (1985) 33–44; furthermore B. Doherty, "Competing for the Crown: Tertullian, Montanism, and 'Voluntary Martyrdom' Revisited", *Phronema* 36/2 (2021) 1–32.

[65] See further John 21:18–19; 2 Peter 1:14; Ign., *Rom*. 4.3, and P. Lampe, "Traces of Peter Veneration in Roman Archaeology", in H.K. Bond/L.W. Hurtado (ed.), *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015) 273–317 (http://doi.org/10.11588/heidok.00025161).

[66] See above at n. 30 and 31.

own neck in the immediate future. Taking the context of the Antonine Plague into account, the logia are illuminated from an additional angle.

2.3 *Health-promoting ecstatic experiences, triggered by ascetic practises*

Logion 13 is an authentic oracle by Priscilla:

> Purity brings about harmony, and they see visions (*visiones vident*) and, turning their faces downwards (*ponentes faciem deorsum*), also hear clear sayings, as salutary/healing as they also are mysterious (*voces audiunt manifestas tam salutares quam et occultas*; in Tertullian, *Exh. cast.* 10.5).

Thus, those who lead a pure, ascetic life have visions and hear clear voices that are not only mysterious but also "healing" and "wholesome". This would be the literal translation of *salutares.* One can only guess how the health-promoting effect of the (visual and[67]) auditive experiences was conceptualized by the believers. The charismatics who heard these voices appear to have exercised a certain meditation practice with their faces turned downwards[68] – in either a sitting or kneeling position or even lying on the ground face down.

A precondition for these "healthy" and "healing" ecstatic experiences was "purity" through ascetic behaviour and fasting. What "purity" means is illuminated by logia 3, 11, 28, and 31. The founders of the movement propagate fasting (logion 3),[69] and Priscilla in logion 11 lets the Paraclete proclaim, "They are bodies, yet they hate the body", advocating

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[67] Grammatically, the adjectives *manifestas, salutares, occultas* could also relate to *visiones.*

[68] Cf. the famous depiction of the Delphic Pythia (together with Aegeus consulting the oracle) on a kylix, Berlin Museum, Inv. 2538. Did the charismatics in the Priscilla logion also inhale something as it was related, e.g., about the Delphic Pythia or the Apollo prophetesses of Didyma (Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.11)? Priscilla's logion does not show this. Yet, the new prophets' insistence on purity – that is, sobriety, abstinence and fasting – as trigger and prerequisite of voices and visions is paralleled by Apollo oracles. As preparation for her encounter with the deity, the Delphic Pythia undergoes purification rituals, e.g., bathing in the Castalian spring (Schol. Euripides, *Phoen*. 224) and drinking sacred water (Pausanias 10.24.7). A stainless moral conduct is a prerequisite of her cultic purity (Plutarch, *De Pythiae Oraculis* 22 [405 C]). The Didyma prophetesses take baths and are fasting (ἀσιτία) for three days as preparation for their divinations (Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.11, relying on Porphyry): πρὸ τῆς χρησμῳδίας ... τά τε λουτρὰ τῆς προφήτιδος καὶ ἡ τριῶν ὅλων ἡμερῶν ἀσιτία. For roots of the New Prophecy in Phrygian religiosity, also in ecstatic practices of the Cybele cult, see further V.E. Hirschmann, *Horrenda Secta: Untersuchungen zum frühchristlichen Montanismus und seinen Verbindungen zur paganen Religion Phrygiens* (Historia Einzelschriften 179; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005).

[69] See also logion 29: Each year two weeks (from Monday to Friday) of fasting with only "dry foods".

asceticism.[70] Logion 28 pushes the "discipline of sobriety and abstinence". Accordingly, logion 31[71] holds that leading a celibate life (*non enim accepi uxorem*) without alcohol consumption (*non bibens vinum*) like a Nazoraios (Num 6:3–4) is a "clean" life (*mundus sum*).

> *Ne accedas ad me, quoniam mundus sum:*
>
> *non enim accepi uxorem,*
>
> *nec est sepulcrum patens guttur meum,*
>
> *sed sum Nazaraeus Dei, non bibens vinum sicut illi.*

Logion 31 also uses an additional motif to illuminate what is meant by "clean". The first person singular, speaking in the logion, asserts: "My throat is not an open tomb" (*nec est sepulcrum patens guttur meum*). In parallelism to sobriety and abstinence the metaphor could express that he or she is not a glutton.[72] However, I suggest a different interpretation of the "open tomb" metaphor: An ill person's throat emits foul odours like an "open tomb". Galen (9.357) specifically mentions the stinking (δυσώδης) breath of patients suffering from the Antonine Plague. In this case, the Montanist author says: I am "clean", that is, sober, abstinent, ascetic – and healthy. Therefore (cf. *quoniam*), keep your distance to me *(ne accedas ad me).* We will come back to this social distancing shortly.

2.4 *A health-promoting effect of asceticism*

[70] Hate of the body also implies being unafraid of "public exposure", of "being stared at by humankind" and suffering "shame" in the "public arena" when facing martyrdom (logion 23 of an anonymous author in Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4).

[71] A logion in Origen, *Fr. Tit.* (in Pamphilus, *Apol. pro. Orig*. 35 [8] = *Origenis Opera Omnia* 5.291, ed. Lommatzsch; also *PG* 14.1306).

[72] *Guttur* can specifically mean "gluttonous throat" in Juv., *Sat*. 2.114: An older man with a "big (= gluttonous) throat" (*magnum guttur*) presides over a feast where adherents of Cybele celebrate Cybele's abominations (*turpis Cybeles*); in Juvenal's opinion, they should be castrated according to "Phrygian custom" (*Phrygio more*). Does the Montanist author specifically say that he or she is not like the gluttonous devotees of the Phrygian Cybele cult, forming identity through a boundary marker?

Logion 28 also propagates a health-promoting effect of asceticism, yet in a more direct way than logion 13, without the detour via ecstatic experiences. According to the logion, the "Holy Spirit" foresees "worldly plagues" (*ex providentia imminentium … mundialium plagarum*) and issues warnings, mandating – "as remedies" (*remedia*) (sic!) – "certain obligations", for example the "discipline of sobriety and abstinence" (*sobrietatis et abstinentiae disciplinam*).[73] Thus, the purity of "sobriety and abstinence" is considered a "remedy" against the "worldly plagues". It can reasonably be assumed that the new prophets also saw a medical aspect in this. According to them, abstinence was a helpful, if not immunizing, *remedium* against "plagues". Whether it was effective or not is up to placebo research. Yet, one measure described in the logia (logion 31) was effective against plagues: social distancing. *Ne accedas ad me, quoniam mundus sum*/"you should not come close to me because I am clean", the new prophets exclaimed, according to logion 31.[74]

In sum, taking logia 13 and 28 together, the new prophets considered (1) ecstatic-meditative practices having positive health effects. (2) These ecstatic experiences, visions and auditive sensations, were triggered by an ascetic lifestyle, especially fasting. (3) The ascetic lifestyle itself, including "sobriety and abstinence", was construed as health-beneficial "remedy" against "plagues". (4) The "purity" and "cleanness" allegedly gained by ascetic lifestyles led (at least some) Cataphrygians to social distancing, which enabled them to preserve their "cleanness" and *de facto* reduced their risk of infection with the plague.

[73] Logion 28 = Tertullian, *De Jejuniis* 13.5, alluding to an oracular prescription by the Holy Spirit.
[74] (1) The dating of the logion quoted by Origen in his *Commentary on Titus* (see n. 71, above) is unclear. Nonetheless, it matches the asceticism of Priscilla and the other founders (see logia 3 and 11, above). However, even if logion 31 had been composed by a second- or third-generation prophet before Origen sometime in the 230s/240s wrote his *Commentary on Titus* (thus W. Tabbernee, "'Recognizing the Spirit': Second-generation Montanist Oracles", *Studia Patristica* 40 [2006] 521–526, on p. 525), social distancing would have been appropriate also then, because the plague flared up again in the 230s CE (see above). (2) Tertullian (*Or*. 18) mentions fasting Christians who "withhold the kiss of peace after prayer", although it is "the seal of prayer". Were there also medical reasons behind this social-distancing behaviour?

2.5 *Apocalyptic mood and charismatic experiences*

Finally, when the Antonine Plague is considered, an additional background of the New Prophecy's apocalyptic mood is exposed. Maximilla predicts more "wars and anarchy" (πολέμους καὶ ἀκαταστασίας προεμαντεύσατο, logia 15–16 in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.16.18), which is understandable considering the deep socio-economic and demographic changes in the empire in the aftermath of the deadly disease, not to mention the wars under Marcus Aurelius. The noun ἀκαταστασία denotes instability and confusion.[75] Maximilla expects a near end of the world, considering herself the last prophet (logion 17).[76] Montanus expects an impending judgement (logion 2.2)[77] as well as fires consuming "all the face of the earth" (logion 10).[78]

The experience of the devastating Antonine Plague may well have helped to rekindle the fire of early Christian charismatic religiosity (cf. 1 Cor 12; 14) by sparking "new" ecstatic prophetism, with an expectation of a near end of the world, an allegedly health-beneficial asceticism, and predictions of not only further disasters but also imminent salvation in a heavenly Jerusalem (logion 2); even the ordinary believers will shine brighter than the moon (logion 7).

Such religiosity, which expected an imminent reversal of the dire present circumstances, was appealing for many – at least in the Phrygian hinterland where Tymion and Pepouza were located. In Tymion, additional hardships – of an economic nature – correlated with the apocalyptic mood of the New Prophecy, as we documented with an inscription from 205 CE that we discovered during our archaeological campaigns in Phrygia

[75] Cf. also 2 Cor 6:5. Maximilla echoes Paul's writings extensively, as H.E. Mader has shown expertly in *Montanistische Orakel und kirchliche Opposition: Der frühe Streit zwischen den phrygischen "neuen Propheten" und dem Autor der vorepiphanischen Quelle als biblische Wirkungsgeschichte des 2. Jh. n. Chr*. (NTOA 97; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012) 145–190.
[76] Logion 17 was quoted by an Anti-Phrygian author in Epiph., *Pan*. 48.2.4.
[77] Tertullian, *Ecst. fr*. (in Praedestinatus, *Haer*. 1.26) refers to this prophecy by Montanus. Cf. also logion 23 by an anonymous author in Tertullian, *Fug.* 9.4. Furthermore Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.24.4.
[78] Logion 10 is attributed to Montanus by Michael the Syrian, *Chron*. 9.3.

close to the said two country towns onto which Montanists expected the heavenly New Jerusalem to descend.[79] The inscription shows that the tenant farmers of Tymion suffered from "unlawful exactions" (*inlicitas exactiones*), i.e., from persons "who insist to ask for dues in a very pushy way" (*perseverantes ut exigant instantissime munera*), that is, "in an unlawful way" (*inlicite munera exigentes*).

The correlation of the existence of Montanists at Tymion, on the one hand, and, in the same time frame, the economic repressions of the farming Tymion inhabitants, on the other, does not automatically show a "causality". However, it may explain why such a religiosity with ecstatic elements and positive images of the near future was attractive to people in dire circumstances. The ecstatic practices could serve as a vent for frustration and pain; the New Jerusalem was a goal to live towards, giving meaning to hard lives that otherwise lacked sense.

The same can be said about the catastrophic pandemic circumstances under the reign of Marcus Aurelius. An apocalyptic religiosity with ecstatic prophesying of a soon-to-be

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[79] See Tabbernee/Lampe, *Pepouza and Tymion*, 49–74, especially on p. 57; P. Lampe, "Die montanistischen Tymion und Pepouza im Lichte der neuen Tymioninschrift", *ZAC* 8 (2004) 498–512 (https://doi.org/10.1515/zach.2005.8.3.498); P. Lampe/W. Tabbernee, "Das Reskript von Septimius Severus und Caracalla an die Kolonen der kaiserlichen Domäne von Tymion und Simoe", *Epigraphica Anatolica* 37 (2004) 169–178 (https://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/EpAnat/37 pdfs web/037169.pdf); P. Lampe, "Das Neue Jerusalem der Montanisten in Phrygien", in G. Theißen/H.U. Steymans/S. Ostermann/K.M. Schmidt/A. Moresino-Zipper (ed.), *Jerusalem und die Länder: Ikonographie – Topographie – Theologie* (Festschrift Max Küchler; NTOA 70; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) 253–270 (https://www-vr-elibrary-de.ubproxy.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/doi/pdf/10.13109/9783666533907.253). Our discovery of the two lost *poleis* of Pepouza and Tymion was confirmed by numerous historians such as W. Weiss, T.D. Barnes, C.M. Robeck, Jr., T. Gnoli, S. Destephen, M. Ritter, M. Mazza, and S. Mitchell: W. Tabbernee and P. Lampe can "claim credit for identifying the location of the Montanist centres Pepuza and Tymion" (Mitchell on p. XV). See S. Mitchell, *The Christians of Phrygia from Rome to the Turkish Conquest* (Leiden: Brill, 2023) XV, 419–422 with n. 364; M. Mazza, "I coloni si lamentano: sottomissione e resistenza in alcune iscrizioni del III secolo dC", *Studia Historica, Historia Antigua* 25 (2007) 451–467, on p. 458 ("inoppugnabili"); M. Ritter, "Zwanzig Jahre Alte Kirche in Forschung und Darstellung", *Theologische Rundschau* 75/1 (2010) 57–58; S. Destephen, reviewing P. McKechnie, *Christianizing Asia Minor* (*Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 1 [2022] 139); T. Gnoli, reviewing W. Tabbernee/P. Lampe, *Pepouza and Tymion* (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2009.04.07*); C.M. Robeck, Jr., "Montanism and Present Day 'Prophets'", *Pneuma* 32 (2010) 413–429, on pp. 421–422; T.D. Barnes, "William Tabbernee and Montanism", *Cristianesimo nella storia* 31 (2010) 945–956, on pp. 945–946; W. Weiss, reviewing V. Hirschmann, *Horrenda Secta* (*HoSozKult* 2006: https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-7581?title=v e-hirschmann-horrenda-secta&recno=1&q=horrenda&sort=newestPublished&fq=&total=1), and others.

reversal of hardship – and with valuing of women in leadership positions – aided many (also women) to cope with the tragedy of the time and helps explain the rapid spread of the New Prophecy across the empire – something that Montanism and the Antonine Plague had in common in the same time window.

3. Conclusion

(1) The unbridled plague and its enormous death rate shook up the entire empire, depopulating towns and districts as well as decimating armies. Effective means to contain the disease were not at hand. The two emperors, mostly at war away from the centre, only alleviated some economic symptoms. Being tossed about by destiny, people felt a loss of control and orientation.

(2) The vacuum was partly filled by religious rituals and magic practices. Religious representatives were consulted for remedies against the plague. There was a run particularly on Asia Minor oracles and prophets, even in Rome, where an Asia Minor pagan prophet fascinated the crowd.

(3) This was the larger context of the emergence of the New Prophecy, which was but one phenomenon amongst comparable others attempting to make the people feel understood in their anxieties.

(4) The New Prophecy commenced in small country *poleis* conceivably also because people fled crowded cities to the less infected countryside.

(5) The New Prophecy rapidly spreading across the Roman empire and the pandemic raging through the same empire at the same time show a correlation that calls for investigation. The contextualization of the early years of the New Prophecy within the

disaster of the Antonine Plague enhances our understanding of this charismatic movement and its logia by casting additional light on them.

(6) Several logia appear to allude to the pandemic. Logion 25 mentions "*moderate*", yet – this is unusual and surprising – *deadly* fever, as Galen described it during the pandemic. Logion 31 pinpoints another plague symptom: appallingly bad breath. Even social distancing is mandated to remain "clean". Logion 28 mentions "worldy plagues" foreseen by the Spirit.

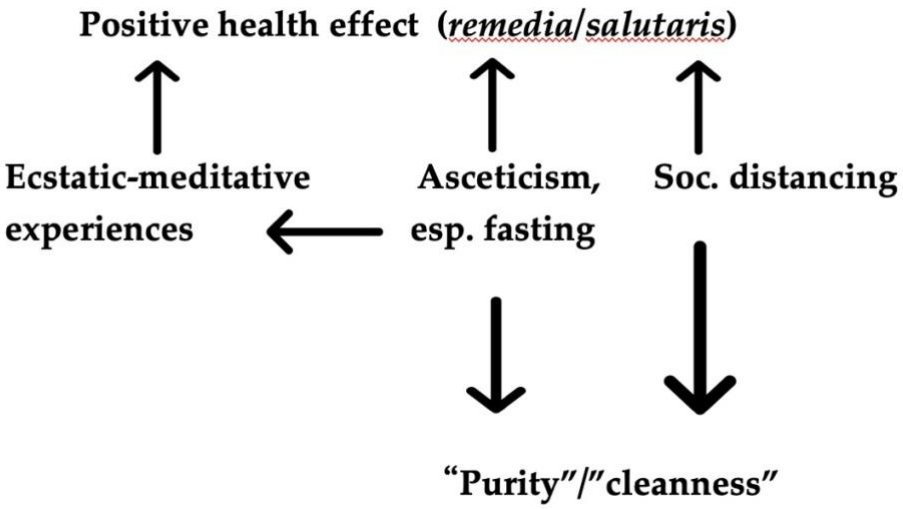
(7) While pagan oracles mainly mandated sacrifices, religious banquets, libations as well as hymns as remedies against the plague, the new prophets considered

● ecstatic-meditative practices having positive health effects.

● These ecstatic experiences, visions and auditive sensations, were facilitated by an ascetic lifestyle, especially fasting.

● The ascetic lifestyle itself, including "sobriety and abstinence", was considered a health-beneficial "remedy" against "plagues".

● The "purity" and "cleanness" allegedly gained by an ascetic lifestyle motivated (at least some) new prophets to distance themselves socially, as social distancing helped them to preserve their "cleanness". *De facto*, however, social distance reduced their risk of infection with the plague, no matter whether the protagonists were aware of this or not.



(8) Montanists – and other contemporary Christians – did not shy away from *martyrdom* (logia 23–25) in a situation in which there was a high risk of dying soon anyway. In a pandemic, the idea of facing one's own death is omnipresent. If one has a high chance to die anyhow, then trying to die as martyr hero, giving meaning to this death, is preferred to dying unspectacularly in bed.

(9) The New Prophecy's *apocalyptic* mood – with prophecies of instability and chaos as well as a soon-to-be ending of the cruel world and an imminent salvation – becomes even more understandable when considering the devastating pandemic situation with its dire socio-economic and demographic upheavals. A religiosity with *ecstatic* elements could serve as a vent for frustration and pain; an eschaton of a New Jerusalem was a goal to live towards to, giving meaning to hard lives.

Appendix

Cornerstones for Dating the Beginnings of the New Prophecy in Phrygia

1 Gratus's proconsulship

According to the Anonymous in Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.16.7), Montanus began to prophesy when an otherwise unknown *Gratus* was proconsul in Asia. As far as the list of proconsuls of Asia in the period of 160–173 CE can be reconstructed – the evidence is burdened with uncertainties – there are several empty time slots where Gratus may fit in.[80] Thomasson (*Laterculi* 1, 227–230; 1 retract., 85–86), updating Alföldy's as well as older reconstructions, offers three empty slots: one in **164/165**,[81] two in the timespan of **166 (2nd half) to 170 (1st half)**, and one in the timespan of **172 (2nd half) to 174 (1st half)**. Filippini ("Proconsuli", 759, 764) offers empty time slots in **165/166**[82] and **171/172**, preferring the latter for Gratus.[83] The

[80] See the latest attempts to reconstruct the list of Asian proconsuls in G. Alföldy, *Konsulat und Senatorenstand unter den Antoninen* (Bonn: Habelt, 1977) 215–217; R. Syme, "The Proconsuls of Asia under Antoninus Pius", *ZPE* 51 (1983) 271–290 = R. Syme, *Roman Papers* (vol. 4; ed. A.R. Birley; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 325–346; B.E. Thomasson, *Laterculi Praesidum* (vol. 1; Göteborg: Radius, 1984/Bruxelles: Association L'Antiquité Classique, 1986) 227–230, plus vol. 1 retract. (2009) 85–86; T.D. Barnes, "William Tabbernee and Montanism", *CrSt* 31 (2010) 945–956; A. Filippini, "Su alcuni proconsoli d'Asia all'epoca di Marco Aurelio (168–173): Kaisergeschichte e Kirchengeschichte tra fonti letterarie ed epigrafiche", in M.L. Caldelli/G.L. Gregori (ed.), *Epigrafia e ordine senatorio, 30 anni dopo* (Rome: Quasar, 2014) 745 –776. Cf. also the table in Tabbernee, *Opposition*, 775–778.

[81] D. Fonteius Fronto, in 164/165 CE, was proconsul of Lykia/Pamphylia, not Asia, as Thomasson corrects himself in *Laterculi* 1 retract., 85–86.

[82] Alföldy, Barnes (empty slots: 165/166; 171/172; 172/173 CE) and Filippini concur that there is an empty slot in 165/166 CE. Filippini ("Proconsuli", 764) moves Paullus (whether Servilius Paullus or Sergius Paullus is irrelevant here) from 165/166 CE (thus Thomasson: "haud post a. 166/167, potius paulo ante") to 168/169 CE, without suggesting a proconsul's name for 165/166 CE.

[83] Based on Barnes ("William Tabbernee", 952–954): Gratus proconsul of Asia in 171/172 CE or 172/173 CE. (a) A principal reason is Eusebius's *Chronicon* which in its Latin version (in Jerome, *GCS* 47, Eusebius VII, 206, ed. Helm) dates the beginning of the New Prophecy "a. XI Marci Antonini" (= 171/172 CE) and in its Armenian version to 172/173 CE (*GCS* 20, Eusebius V, 222, ed. Karst). The question is whether other evidence overrules this dating by Eusebius (see below). (b) Nothing can be concluded from Eusebius's dating of Apollinaris (*pace* Filippini, "Proconsuli", 758), who commenced as Bishop of Hierapolis "a. X Marci Antonini" (= 170/171 CE) (Eusebius, *Chron.*: *GCS* 47, Eusebius VII, 206, ed. Helm; Armenian text: 171/172 CE) and wrote against the New Prophecy (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.27; 5.16.1). From this note, it is impossible to infer a *terminus ante quem* for the commencement of the New Prophecy, because Apollinaris could have written his polemical letter before or after 170/171 CE.

question thus will be whether, *within the interval from 164/165 to 173/174 CE, an earlier date will be more likely for the New Prophecy's beginnings than a later one*.

2 Apollonius writes forty years after the New Prophecy's commencement

Apollonius (in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl*. 5.18.12) claims that, since the New Prophecy's beginning, "a 40th year happened" (τεσσαρακοστὸν ἐτύγχανεν ἔτος) until he himself composed his writing. This would date Apollonius's writing to about 204 CE at the earliest if we assumed 164/165 CE, the earliest possible Gratus slot, as commencement of the New Prophecy, or about 214 CE at the latest, if Gratus was proconsul in 173/174 CE.

2.1 *Tertullian's De ecstasi 7*

Tertullian responds to Apollonius in the seventh "book" of his *De ecstasi*, according to Jerome (*Vir. ill.* 24; 40; 53). T.D. Barnes[84] unconvincingly considers this a clue for a later date (171/172 or 172/173 CE) of Gratus's proconsulship. However, Tertullian's response to Apollonius only shows that Apollonius wrote *before* Tertullian (presumably around 213 CE) composed the seventh "book" (*liber/volumen*) of *De ecstasi* – nothing else. There is no indication that Tertullian responded to Apollonius immediately, e.g., within only a year's time.

2.2 *Apollonius did not flourish after February 4th, 211 CE*

What really matters is Jerome's remark (*Vir. ill.* 40) that Apollonius flourished under Commodus (177/180 CE to 192 CE) and Septimius Severus (193 CE to *February* 4th, 211 CE): *Floruit autem Apollonius sub Commodo Severoque principibus*. Barnes ignores this remark. But it supports an earlier date in the middle or second half of the 160s CE: A Gratus

[84] T.D. Barnes, "The Chronology of Montanism", *JTS N.S.* 21 (1970) 403–408, on p. 408.

proconsulship from 171 CE (second half) to 172 CE plus 40 years would date the writing of Apollonius into the reign of Caracalla, because Septimius Severus died February 4th, 211.[85] Thus, 171/172 CE (or later) needs to be ruled out. However, if Apollonius wrote in 204 or 205 (= Gratus proconsul in 164/165 CE or 165/166 CE), this date would be only two thirds into Septimius Severus's reign, fitting the *floruit sub Commodo Severoque* best.

3 Thirteen peaceful years

The Anonymous in Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 5.16.19) claims that there was an interval of more than thirteen peaceful years (at least for Asia Minor and the Asia Minor Christians) between Maximilla's death and the Anonymous's own writing. In view of contemporary military operations, only one interval fits: from 180 CE when Commodus made a treaty with the Quadi and Marcomanni (Dio Cassius 73.2.3) to 193 CE when civil war broke out. If Maximilla and the two other founders of the New Prophecy had died by the end of 180 CE, with Maximilla being the last one of the trio,[86] and their movement had only started in 171/172 CE, then (a) all three founders would have died within only eight to nine years (which is possible in a pandemic) and (b) the movement would have spread to Rome and Lyon in only about six years at most, which seems less likely than in about a dozen years from the middle of the 160s to 177/178 CE (= Marcus Aurelius's "seventeenth year"; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5. Prol. and 5.1–3).

4 Thyateira

[85] Cf. Dio Cassius 77.15.2, and A.R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (London: Routledge, 1999) 187.
[86] Maximilla in Epiphanius, *Pan.* 48.2.4.

According to Epiphanius, *Pan*. 51.33 (vol. 2, 307, ed. Holl), numerous inhabitants of Thyateira at some point between 170 and 172 CE[87] converted to the New Prophecy (μετήνεγκαν τὴν πᾶσαν πόλιν εἰς τὴν αὐτῶν αἵρεσιν). Did they need this "new" religious approach – with ecstatic prophesying and apocalyptic visions of a near end – to be able to cope with a particular burden in the city? In 170 CE, barbarians had crossed the Bosporus and penetrated the province, so that the emperor's treasury, in 170/171 CE, had the city of Thyateira pay a "heavy" tribute to support the military defence against the Bastarni barbarians (*TAM* V/2 982: [δεκ]απρωτεύσαντα τὴν βα/[ρυτ]έραν πρᾶξιν Βαστερ/[νικ]ήν).

Pace Filippini ("Proconsuli", 758), Epiphanius's chronological Thyateira information, assisted by epigraphic evidence, renders a Gratus proconsulship in 171/172 CE (or later) not impossible but rather unlikely. If the New Prophecy commenced in Pepouza/Tymion in 171/172 CE, how could Thyateirans more than 200 km away convert in droves to this new movement at the same time, around 171 CE? The scenario becomes more likely after Montanist beginnings in Pepouza in the 160s.

5 Epiphanius's dating of Montanus's emergence

Regarding Gratus's proconsulship, Syme (*Roman Papers,* 338), for prosopographical reasons, convincingly rejected a date before 160 CE, thus discarding Epiphanius's (*Pan*. 48.1.2) remark that Montanus's Christian prophesying began in the 19th year of Antoninus Pius (= 156/157 CE).[88] Moreover, Epiphanius's remark clearly is not part of the second-century source, extant in *Pan*. 48.1.4–48.13.8,[89] that Epiphanius used for his discussion of the

[87] Thus Filippini, "Proconsuli", 758. However, for the shakiness of this date, see W. Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (NAPSMS 16; Macon: Mercer University Press/Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997) 136–138.
[88] Tabbernee, already in his 1978 dissertation (*Opposition*, 761–767), also gave convincing reasons to discard Epiphanius's remark. So did Filippini, "Proconsuli", 758.
[89] For Epiphanius's source and its extent, see Mader, *Montanistische Orakel,* 12–36.

Montanists – more than two centuries after the first “new prophets” emerged – and therefore hardly has any historical value.

6 Conclusion

Within the nine-year interval from 164/165 to 173/174 CE, earlier dates are more likely than later ones, that is, the limited “soft” evidence available to us suggests a commencement of the Phrygian New Prophecy sometime in the *middle or second half of the 160s* as most likely solution. The evidence in paragraphs 2–4 outweighs Eusebius’s dating of the New Prophecy’s commencement in the *Chronicon* (*GCS* 47, Eusebius VII, 206, ed. Helm; see n. 83, above).