

# SICKNESS UNTO DEATH IN EARLY TIMES

We may not know for sure what disease the ancient Greek writer Thucydides described in his fifth-century BCE account of the “Plague of Athens”—it could have been typhus, smallpox, measles, or perhaps the pneumonic or bubonic plague—but his report is important nonetheless for its description of the devastation the epidemic wrought and the social changes it produced in the process. A similar situation occurs with the Roman writer Galen’s account of the “Antonine Plague” of the second century CE: It is difficult to correlate the disease Galen describes with the bubonic plague, yet any of the other diseases just noted could have been the culprit. In any case, “plague” seems an apt name for so destructive an outbreak in both Thucydides and Galen’s accounts. An additional example of ill-defined plague is provided by the third-century CE author Cyprian of Carthage, whose account we include here.

The bubonic plague as such came in three great pandemics from the Middle Ages on. The first pandemic, from the sixth century CE to the eighth, was known as the Plague of Justinian; it ravaged the Byzantine Empire. The second major pandemic, called the Black Death, arrived in Italy (from Crimea) in late 1347 and quickly spread across Europe. Not knowing of “germs,” people were inclined to blame their own faithlessness, the stars, or malodorous air for the spread of the disease. As Giovanni Boccaccio wrote in the *Decameron* (1350–53), “whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His

just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, [the Black Death] had had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so, calamitously, had spread into the West.” He continues, “in men and women alike it [i.e., the illness] first betrayed itself by the emergence of certain tumours in the groin or the armpits, some of which grew as large as a common apple, others as an egg, some more, some less, which the common folk called *gavoccioli*.” These were the pus-filled “buboes” of bubonic plague, swellings of the lymph nodes. The *Decameron* concerns ten friends who shelter in place during the pandemic, telling entertaining stories to pass the time. Meanwhile, as many as 40 million Europeans—about one-third of the continent’s population—died of the disease.

Boccaccio’s work also marks the beginning, post-plague, of the Renaissance in Italy—as if, from out of the ashes of the Black Death there arose a renewed human spirit. During this time, European scholars rediscovered a number of classical physicians, including Hippocrates, the fifth-century BCE Greek philosopher who is considered the father of medicine; and Galen, who we have already mentioned.

Later outbreaks of the plague continued to erupt in Europe for the next three hundred years. The Great Plague of London, which Daniel Defoe chronicled, struck in 1665. After that, it seemed to fade away—at least until another

plague pandemic hit India and elsewhere in the 1890s.

The arrival of Europeans in the Americas provides a different example of the devastating effects of infectious disease. Native Americans, who had had no contact with Europe before then, had no immune defenses against diseases like smallpox, typhus, diphtheria, cholera, and

measles. Carried into the New World on European bodies, these illnesses wiped out huge numbers of Native Americans (perhaps as much as 90 percent).

In this section, too, we look at a few other diseases—influenza and yellow fever among them—from the time before modern medical science.

# ■ Thucydides on the Athenian Plague

**Date:** 5th century BCE

**Author:** Thucydides

**Genre:** book excerpt

**Geographic Region:** Greece

## Summary Overview

The Athenian Plague of 430 BCE was a disease that ravaged the Greek city of Athens, killing an estimated 75,000 people. The plague took place in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, a decades-long conflict between the powerful Greek cities of Athens and Sparta.

The plague arose at a time when the ongoing war had caused forced migration into the city of Athens, which led to severe overcrowding and unhygienic conditions within the city's walls. A variety of serious symptoms were associated with the illness, including inflammation, cough, vomiting, and intestinal distress, and victims generally died within a week of falling ill. Some patients survived, but the disease was severely contagious and the mortality rate was high. It is estimated that one out of every four people living in Athens at the time died from the plague. Among the dead were Pericles, the general and leader of Athens during the first phase of the war.

The huge death rate and suddenness of the plague took a significant toll on Athenian society and institutions. According to the contemporary historian Thucydides, whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* is our main source of information about the disease (and is excerpted here), the constant fear of death caused Athenians to stop respecting laws or religion. Though the city eventually recovered enough strength to execute its war against Sparta, the chaos and loss Athens suffered meant that it never recovered its position as leader of an empire.

## Defining Moment

Most of our information about the Athenian plague comes from the writings of Thucydides, an Athenian general and historian who wrote a monumental history of the Peloponnesian War. Early in the war, he commanded Athenian troops in an action that went poorly for Athens, and he was banished from the city as punishment. He was, therefore, able to travel and witness the effect the war had on Athens, Sparta, and smaller Greek city-states and islands. In his *History*, Thucydides analyzes the background of the war and the details of particular battles but also discusses the motivations of individuals, smaller governments, and the Athenian and

Spartan empires. Throughout the work, the author pays close attention to the emotions of and relationships between the parties involved, and his *History* is still considered a foundational work of political and military philosophy.

Since the early 5th century BCE, Athens had been slowly expanding its power. The city especially focused on building up its fleet until it had the most powerful navy in the Mediterranean. Sparta had meanwhile maintained an army that was the supreme power on land. Athens' growth alarmed Sparta and the cities started to quarrel over small territories; politicians in both cities strengthened their military powers further for an inevitable war. The two powers began to clash in earnest in the middle of the 5th century

BCE, but all-out war did not begin until 460 BCE. The combatants fought intermittently until concluding a peace treaty in 445 BCE. This peace lasted only fifteen years, however, and in 431 BCE open hostilities broke out again.

Initially, Athens used its navy to raid coastal towns and islands that were allied with Sparta, while Sparta used its army to besiege and sack Athenian allies on the mainland. Athens, which was led by the general Pericles, had strong defensive walls. These walls also sheltered the town's port, Piraeus, meaning that the Athenian navy could bring supplies to the town by sea even while the Spartans laid siege on land. Athens' lack of a strong land-based army, however, meant that any wall-less town in the countryside around Athens was vulnerable to the attack of Spartan troops. To protect the city's allies, Pericles permitted villagers to shelter within Athens' walls while the Athenian navy harassed the Spartan army from the sea.

Unfortunately, this strategy meant that huge numbers of villagers left their homes and streamed into Athens, where they lived in cramped and unhygienic quarters. Once the disease entered, it swept through the masses infecting and killing in huge numbers. The combination of Spartans outside the walls and disease within caused major changes to Athenian laws, customs, and society as a whole.

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### Author Biography

Thucydides (c. 460–c. 395 BCE) was a Greek historian and politician noted especially for his history of the Peloponnesian War, a work that brought unprecedented objectivity and thoroughness to the study of human affairs. Little is known about his personal life, other than that he was an Athenian and that, as a youth, he may have attended a lecture by the historian Herodotus that helped to set him on his path as a scholar.

### HISTORICAL DOCUMENT: From Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, Book II (On the Plague)

In the first days of summer the Lacedaemonians and their allies, with two-thirds of their forces as before, invaded Attica, under the command of Archidamus, son of Zeuxidamus, King of Lacedaemon, and sat down and laid waste the country. Not many days after their arrival in Attica the plague first began to show itself among the Athenians. It was said that it had broken out in many places previously in the neighbourhood of Lemnos and elsewhere; but a pestilence of such extent and mortality was nowhere remembered. Neither were the physicians at first of any service, ignorant as they were of the proper way to treat it, but they died themselves the most thickly, as they visited the sick most often; nor did any human art succeed any better. Supplications in the temples, divinations, and so forth were found equally futile, till the overwhelming nature of the disaster at last put a stop to them altogether.

It first began, it is said, in the parts of Ethiopia above Egypt, and thence descended into Egypt and Libya and into most of the King's country. Suddenly falling upon Athens, it first attacked the population in Piraeus—which was the occasion of their saying that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the reservoirs, there being as yet no wells

there—and afterwards appeared in the upper city, when the deaths became much more frequent. All speculation as to its origin and its causes, if causes can be found adequate to produce so great a disturbance, I leave to other writers, whether lay or professional; for myself, I shall simply set down its nature, and explain the symptoms by which perhaps it may be recognized by the student, if it should ever break out again. This I can the better do, as I had the disease myself, and watched its operation in the case of others.

That year then is admitted to have been otherwise unprecedentedly free from sickness; and such few cases as occurred all determined in this. As a rule, however, there was no ostensible cause; but people in good health were all of a sudden attacked by violent heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath. These symptoms were followed by sneezing and hoarseness, after which the pain soon reached the chest, and produced a hard cough. When it fixed in the stomach, it upset it; and discharges of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, accompanied by very great distress. In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms, which in some cases ceased soon after, in others much later. Externally the body was not very hot to the touch, nor pale in its appearance, but reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. But internally it burned so that the patient could not bear to have on him clothing or linen even of the very lightest description; or indeed to be otherwise than stark naked. What they would have liked best would have been to throw themselves into cold water; as indeed was done by some of the neglected sick, who plunged into the rain-tanks in their agonies of unquenchable thirst; though it made no difference whether they drank little or much. Besides this, the miserable feeling of not being able to rest or sleep never ceased to torment them. The body meanwhile did not waste away so long as the distemper was at its height, but held out to a marvel against its ravages; so that when they succumbed, as in most cases, on the seventh or eighth day to the internal inflammation, they had still some strength in them. But if they passed this stage, and the disease descended further into the bowels, inducing a violent ulceration there accompanied by severe diarrhoea, this brought on a weakness which was generally fatal. For the disorder first settled in the head, ran its course from thence through the whole of the body, and, even where it did not prove mortal, it still left its mark on the extremities; for it settled in the privy parts, the fingers and the toes, and many escaped with the loss of these, some too with that of their eyes. Others again were seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.

*No remedy was found that could be used as a specific; for what did good in one case, did harm in another.*



*Plague in an Ancient City, by Michiel Sweerts, c. 1653*

But while the nature of the distemper was such as to baffle all description, and its attacks almost too grievous for human nature to endure, it was still in the following circumstance that its difference from all ordinary disorders was most clearly shown. All the birds and beasts that prey upon human bodies, either abstained from touching them (though there were many lying unburied), or died after tasting them. In proof of this, it was noticed that birds of this kind actually disappeared; they were not about the bodies, or indeed to be seen at all. But of course the effects which I have mentioned could best be studied in a domestic animal like the dog.

Such then, if we pass over the varieties of particular cases which were many and peculiar, were the general features of the distemper. Meanwhile the town enjoyed an immunity from all the ordinary disorders; or if any case occurred, it ended in this. Some died in neglect, others in the midst of every attention. No remedy was found that could be used as a specific; for what did good in one case, did harm in another. Strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away, although dieted with the utmost precaution. By far the most terrible fea-

ture in the malady was the dejection which ensued when any one felt himself sickening, for the despair into which they instantly fell took away their power of resistance, and left them a much easier prey to the disorder; besides which, there was the awful spectacle of men dying like sheep, through having caught the infection in nursing each other. This caused the greatest mortality. On the one hand, if they were afraid to visit each other, they perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse: on the other, if they ventured to do so, death was the consequence. This was especially the case with such as made any pretensions to goodness: honour made them unsparing of themselves in their attendance in their friends' houses, where even the members of the family were at last worn out by the moans of the dying, and succumbed to the force of the disaster. Yet it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience, and had now no fear for themselves; for the same man was never attacked twice- never at least fatally. And such persons not only received the congratulations of others, but themselves also, in the elation of the moment, half entertained the vain hope that they were for the future safe from any disease whatsoever.

An aggravation of the existing calamity was the influx from the country into the city, and this was especially felt by the new arrivals. As there were no houses to receive them, they had to be lodged at the hot season of the year in stifling cabins, where the mortality raged without restraint. The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water. The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances, through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepultures: Sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger's pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off.

Nor was this the only form of lawless extravagance which owed its origin to the plague. Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day. Perseverance in what men called honour was popular with none, it was so uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object; but it was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honourable and useful. Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for

the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offences, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little.

## GLOSSARY

**Attica:** the countryside region around Athens

**fetid:** rotten

**Lacedaemonians:** Spartans (the enemies of the Athenians)

**Piraeus:** the neighborhood of Athens around its port

**retching:** vomiting

## Document Analysis

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Thucydides analyzes the effects of the plague by starting with its impact on individual bodies and expanding to larger and larger groups. He begins with a description of specific symptoms, proceeds to look at the changes in small-scale social relationships between families and friends, and ends by discussing the implications for society at large.

He begins the history of the plague by recounting its context and the background of its descent upon Athens. He specifically says that he will “leave to other writers” the task of deciding where the plague came from—he “shall simply set down its nature.” This passage also contains one of Thucydides’s few statements about his own life: He says that he “had the disease myself, and watched its operation,” which lends authority to his description of the symptoms.

Though he does not speculate about the epidemiology of the plague, Thucydides reports its geographic origins and says that it began in the

neighborhood around Piraeus, Athens’ port; this is a likely theory, given that the city was blocked off by the Spartan siege, and all contact with the outside world came by sea. Thucydides then provides a comprehensive and graphic list of symptoms. He lists both visible physical symptoms (redness and inflammation, respiratory and digestive problems), psycho-physiological symptoms (thirst, burning, and feelings of restlessness and insomnia), and the ultimate causes of death. He also describes outcomes that left permanent scars on survivors: loss of extremities, genitals, sight, and even memory.

After the list of physical symptoms, Thucydides describes the “most terrible feature in the malady”: the fear and despair that the disease brought to both infected and non-infected Athenians. Those who showed symptoms became convinced that they would die, and those who did not became terrified of human contact. Well-intentioned people (or those with “pretensions to goodness”) who tried to visit their friends would expose themselves and contract

the disease, meaning that the sick became more and more isolated and “perished from neglect.”

The most chilling and impactful effect of the plague, especially as it related to the ongoing Peloponnesian War, was the way it destabilized the fundamental moral code of Athenian society. Whereas before (according to Thucydides) codes of law, religion, and honor prevented “lawless extravagance” and an unhealthy focus on “present enjoyment,” the plague broke down those codes and allowed society to devolve into unrestrained anarchy.

### Essential Themes

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This plague narrative shows Thucydides’s focus on human behavior as a driving factor for history and the effect that emotions have on our actions. Throughout the passage, he describes the plague as an extreme demonstration of the close tie between the behaviors of individuals and society at large.

The author describes a radical decline in social conventions that matches the declining health of those suffering from the plague. Prior to the disease, for instance, funerals and mourning had been a huge part of Greek society—families and neighbors would come together to mourn the dead and bury them respectfully, often raising a funeral monument and delivering speeches in their honor. Now, with the great number of dead, everyone “buried the bodies as best they could,” even combining burials. Likewise, people in the pre-plague world were afraid to harm

or steal from their neighbors, both because they would be brought to trial and because the gods would see and punish their misbehavior. When Athenians began to realize that everyone was equally likely to die regardless of their behavior, societal consequences became meaningless and respect for laws and gods disappeared.

Thucydides sees this loss of respect as part of a decline in general morality. People have always wanted to act badly, but society always demanded that misdeeds be “done in a corner” and kept out of the public eye. During the plague, however, people began to think of life and money as “things of a day” and to pursue “present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it,” even if it harmed their fellow citizens.

—Hannah Rich, MA

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## ■ Requirements for a Physician

**Date:** c. 320 BCE

**Geographic Region:** Greece

**Author:** Hippocrates

**Genre:** treatise

### Summary Overview

Hippocrates was a Greek physician who is considered the father of Western medicine. The Hippocratic School of Medicine that he founded established medicine as a distinct discipline, separating it from other religious and philosophical studies. In addition, the Hippocratic School is credited with the discovery that diseases are a result of natural causes, not the punishments of angry gods or curses. He encouraged healthy living to prevent disease and attention to environmental dangers that may be contributing factors. He encouraged his students to observe and record the symptoms of their patients and created a natural history of disease. Physicians of Hippocrates's time did not have an accurate understanding of human anatomy and physiology, as there was a strong taboo against dissection, so his methods focused on patient care and outward symptoms of disease. The Hippocratic School worked to professionalize the practice of medicine and taught students the importance of the doctor-patient relationship. In this selection from his teachings, Hippocrates emphasized the importance of the physician's behavior and appearance to earning the trust of his patients and his community.

### Defining Moment

Ancient Greeks believed that disease was punishment from the gods and that healing was miraculous. They believed that supernatural factors were at work in the body; curses and blessings were commonly thought to have a physical effect. Sick people would often travel to sacred sites to seek forgiveness from the gods and advice from priests, and monuments thanking gods for healing were common. By the mid-fifth century BCE, informed in part by the treatment of soldiers on the battlefield, medical practitioners in Greece began to look to natural rather than spiritual causes for disease and injury. This new focus on the body encouraged new lines of inquiry: physicians began to examine environmental and lifestyle factors that seemed to contribute to disease, then recorded symptoms and analyzed treatments.

Leading this movement were Hippocrates and his followers. The Hippocratic School produced a library of medical texts, around sixty of which survive and are known as the Hippocratic Corpus. Though these works vary in age and authorship, they are associated with the core teachings of the Hippocrates himself, and provide a detailed view of the Greek medical profession in its earliest years. Hippocratic students paid for their training and entered into a very close relationship with their teachers, binding themselves to a common ethical code by taking the Hippocratic Oath. They were expected to be disciplined, honest, and professional—key factors in the establishment of the physician as a community leader.

In addition to believing that diseases had a natural cause, Hippocrates and his followers believed in the necessity of observing and recording the progression and symptoms of disease

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