

Plague and excess

A deadly plague in ancient Athens left its mark
on Europe's cultural memory

By Hartmut Leppin

During the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war, a mysterious plague raged through the proud city of Athens, weakening its position against the Spartans. Although it is not clear today which pathogen caused the epidemic, the Athenian historian Thucydides wrote a vivid account of its effects on society, describing uncertainty, lawlessness and a tendency towards excess.

Athens was a magnificent city in 500 BC. The Athenians had defeated the mighty Persian Empire, not without the help of their allies, but in a leading position. Athens was emerging as the dominant power in the Aegean, continuing to stand up to Persia and bringing formerly allied Greek cities under its control. It flexed its naval power with a strong and capable fleet, ensuring dominance of the seas. Culturally, Athens experienced a splendour during classical antiquity that shines to the present day. The tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and the comedies of Aristophanes are still performed today; Herodotus recited the first work of history there and magnificent buildings and works of art were created, for example on the Acropolis. Athenians had been seized by a sudden awareness of their skills (Könnensbewusstsein: Meier, 1980). Their contemporaries were fascinated and fearful of the city's gathering momentum. But the Spartans, who were known for their military discipline and mocked for their cultural backwardness, remained fierce rivals. In 431 BC, war broke out between the two powers. Many other Greek cities joined the war, as did armies from Macedonia and Persia. The war ended with the fall of Athens in 404 BC.

¹ The following quotes in italics are adapted from the translation by C.F. Smith, Cambridge/Mass. 1919.

An account of war and plague

Today, we speak of the Peloponnesian War. The fact that we consider various phases of war and peace during this period as part of a single historical narrative can be traced to the historian Thucydides, whose work was named after this war.¹ The renowned Frankfurt ancient historian Hermann Strasburger called him the founder of political history because unlike Herodotus he wrote mainly about politics and war, and rarely about anything else (1954, 395-428). However, Thucydides also gives a detailed account of a plague that tormented the city of Athens in 430 BC.

It began to spread in the port of Piraeus and then throughout the city, which was overcrowded because of the war. Men, women and children were taken unexpectedly and severely ill. Symptoms travelled from the head downwards; foul breath, coughing and sneezing were a sign of infection and the disease caused vomiting, rashes, ulcers, fever and an unquenchable thirst. Most of the infected died by the seventh or ninth day. Unlucky victims experienced prolonged agony; some lost parts of their limbs, genitalia, eyesight, or memory. Thucydides, himself a survivor, describes the course of the disease in the language of medicine of the time. It is estimated that a quarter of the population died, later sources state that Pericles, the political leader of Athens, perished among them.

Many modern physicians have attempted to determine the disease which caused the plague of Athens. References have been made to measles, Ebola, the Marburg virus or Borrelia. Perhaps research will gain clarity if bones from victims of the epidemic with sufficiently well-preserved DNA to determine the disease can be found. Investigations that are still currently disputed point to typhoid fever.

Splendour and catastrophe

Beyond documenting the terrible consequences of the plague, Thucydides delivers a parable of the transience of a political order and the limits of human agency. He artfully prepares the scene of the catastrophe by evoking the splendour of Athens: Pericles delivers a speech to the Athenian casualties of the first year of the war in 431, in which he celebrates not only the fallen but also the city itself (2:35-46). Such elements of ancient historiography did not follow a protocol of the original speech and were often embellished by the historian. Thucydides chose his words consciously. Pericles illuminates the democracy that lets every citizen participate, the open climate of the city, its cultural flourishing. Athens is presented as an example for the whole of Greece. He inculcates how Athens' soft power

attempts to heal; curing the plague was beyond human skill. So the Athenians turned to the gods, prayed in the temples and sought divinations, but all this proved fruitless. Their skills remained ineffective and their power to act scientifically or religiously dwindled away.

Gruesome chronicle of a pandemic

Thucydides describes the Athenians as gripped by powerlessness. *Indeed the character of the disease proved such that it baffles description, the violence of the attack being in each case too great for human nature to endure (2.50.1)*. Even animals avoided the corpses lying in the open or became infected if they ate from them. The disease inflicted the weak as well as the strong. People who were cared for died just as those who were left to rot in the streets. Those who showed



far surpasses that of Sparta. The speech was a eulogy but one that invoked strength. How could anyone want to harm such a magnificent city? To this day, this speech is quoted to evoke the glory of classical Athens.

But Thucydides was more subtle. For the next year of the war began with a Spartan invasion of Attica, the countryside around Athens. This invasion was predictable, as the Athenians relied on the superiority of their fleet for invading Spartan territory, and accepted the fact that their enemies could reach the walls of the city, which protected its inhabitants. *And before the Spartans had been many days in Attica the plague began for the first time to show itself among the Athenians (2.47.3)*. Doctors failed in their

character and cared for others fell victims themselves; not even relatives could care for each other. Thucydides penned a gruesome chronicle of the plague: Dying people crawled to the fountains to cool off, corpses covered the streets, some stacked on top of each other. Even the sanctuaries were full of the dead. Burials, the highest duty of relatives in the ancient world, no longer took place in a regular manner; corpses were even thrown among strangers on funeral pyres.

Social order had disintegrated completely and thrown the city into a complete state of anomie. *For where men hitherto practised concealment, that they were not acting purely after their pleasure, they now showed a more careless daring.*

1 Pericles as orator before the Athenian People's Assembly. He was regarded as a politician who was able to steer the Athenians' emotions and thus pursue a consistent policy. He is shown here on a former Greek banknote.



Photo: Thucydides/Wikimedia

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2 The oldest surviving manuscript of Thucydides' historical work, now in the collection of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence.

3 Greek historian Thucydides (454 – approx. 399 BC) described the effects of the plague on state and society in a fanciful account.



Photo: United Archives/TopFoto/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo

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They saw how sudden was the change of fortune in the case both of those who were prosperous and suddenly died, and of those who before had nothing but in a moment were in possession of the property of the others. And so they resolved to get out of life the pleasures which could be had speedily and would satisfy their lusts, regarding their bodies and their wealth alike as transitory. And no one was eager to practise self-denial in prospect of what was esteemed honour.... No fear of gods or law of men restrained (2.53.1-4). Surrounded by death, the only thing that mattered was to derive some pleasure from life; those who committed crimes no longer expected to face punishment. When people claimed that an oracle saying had predicted that war with the Dorians (which included the Spartans) would result in plague, Thucydides comments soberly: The saying would have been interpreted similarly if a famine had struck rather than a plague. Faced with the virulence of the disease, living excessively and imagining that they had seen things coming was all that the people described in Thucydides' work had left.

Disintegration of political order

It is questionable how far the elaborate account of Thucydides can be trusted (Schmitz, 2005 and Pfeifer, 2020), as it is likely to have been

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- After its victory over the Persians, the city state of Athens emerged as the dominant power in the Aegean. The only remaining rival was Sparta.
- After the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, Athens was stricken by a plague. Historian Thucydides describes in detail its impacts on society and the state.
- In a speech, he has Pericles evoke the splendour of Athens, the benefits of democracy and the city's cultural flourishing – a stark contrast to the plague that was to befall the city in the war.
- In Thucydides' account, the cruelty of the pandemic made no distinction between rich and poor. Faced with the danger of death, unbridled excess erupted.
- Thucydides' description of the plague entered the Euro-Mediterranean memory and was handed down in literary writings – from Lucretius to Albert Camus.

dramatised. In any case, the Athenians did not slacken in their war efforts and performed new rituals to ward off disease. For decades to come, the city held out against Sparta, winning brilliant victories although they ultimately lost the war. Thucydides intended to show how human order, which seemed so firmly established, disintegrated during the crisis. He initially focuses on the consequences of the plague, but they are not the only cause of the disintegration of order. Those who survived the plague gained immunity and felt a lightness in their future expectations, as if no disease could harm them any-

more (2:51:6). In this regard, the self-confidence of the Athenian population did not shatter that quickly.

What actions can be taken during a pandemic? This question has been on the minds of many in recent months, and probably no one has been spared the feeling of powerlessness. The same question worried the Athenians, who knew nothing about microbes as pathogens and certainly nothing about vaccinations, who had no masks, who at best had an inkling of hygiene rules but who found it difficult to reconcile behavioural changes with their values and way of life. If humans failed to provide a remedy, ancient people turned to the gods, who were seen as the cause of the plague, but they did not help either. People were only concerned with survival and excess was a way of relieving pressure.

Their memory was preserved in Thucydides' account. His work set a tradition for Euro-Mediterranean literature, which has repeatedly dealt with the phenomenon of plague and its effect on human behaviour: Lucretius or Virgil in the Latin world, Boccaccio at the beginning of the Italian Renaissance, Albert Camus or José Saramago in the modern era are only mentioned as famous examples. Plagues even greater than the Plague of Athens have been among the recurring experiences of humanity, including perhaps the first pandemic in the 7th century that reduced the population in many regions of Eurasia dramatically, and the great plague in the 14th century. In modern western societies, on the other hand, experiences of epidemics had been all but forgotten until they surfaced again abruptly in 2020. In the Anthropocene, the awareness of our skills (Könnensbewusstsein) goes so far that in some cases people still expect an epidemic can be conquered completely. "The government" is supposed to work with science to fix it, even if politicians sometimes simulate rather than possess the ability to act. In return, they demand a lot of self-control from the population, which seems to have been successful despite all the fuss. Even coronavirus parties, which people like to complain about, are far from the excesses that Thucydides describes. ●



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