

2.47
430
2nd Year/Summer
ATHENS

The Spartans invade Attica again. Plague appears in Athens.

Such was the funeral that took place during this winter, with which the first year of the war came to an end. [2] In the first days of summer the Spartans and their allies, with two-thirds of their forces as before, invaded Attica, under the command of Archidamus son of Zeuxidamus, king of Sparta, and established themselves and laid waste the country. [3] 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 neighborhood of Lemnos^{3a} and elsewhere; but a pestilence of such extent and mortality was nowhere remembered. [4] 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.

2.48
430
2nd Year/Summer
ATHENS

Thucydides describes the origin and progress of the plague. He himself was stricken by it.

It first began, it is said, in the parts of Ethiopia above Egypt, and thence descended into Egypt and Libya^{1a} and into most of the King's country. [2] Suddenly falling upon Athens, it first attacked the population in the 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. [3] 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.^{3a}

That year then is agreed to have been otherwise unprecedentedly free from sickness; and such few cases as occurred, all turned into this. [2] As a

2.49
430
2nd Year/Summer
ATHENS

Symptoms of the plague and its progression through the body are described.

2.46.2a See the Introduction (sec. II.v) for a discussion of speeches in Thucydides.

2.47.3a Lemnos: Map 2.29.

2.48.1a Ethiopia is "above" Egypt—up the Nile River and further away from the sea—from a point of view centered in the

Mediterranean Sea; see Map 2.56, locator.

2.48.3a See the Introduction (sec. I) for a discussion of what is known about Thucydides' life.

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. [3] 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. [4] In most cases also an ineffectual retching followed, producing violent spasms, which in some cases ceased soon after, in others much later. [5] 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. [6] 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 diarrhea, this brought on a weakness which was generally fatal. [7] 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; [8] 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.^{8a}

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. [2] 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.

2.50

430

2nd Year/Summer

ATHENS

Birds of prey abstained from eating plague victims or were poisoned. Such birds actually vanished from the area.

2.49.8a Modern medical authorities do not agree on the identification of this pestilence.

2.51

430

2nd Year/Summer

ATHENS

Strong and weak alike succumbed to the illness. Despair robbed the afflicted of resistance. Those who nursed the sick were stricken in turn. Only people who had survived the plague could show compassion with impunity.

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 city enjoyed an immunity from all the ordinary disorders; or if any case occurred, it ended in this. [2] 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. [3] Strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away, although dieted with the utmost precaution. [4] By far the most terrible feature in the malady was the dejection which ensued when anyone 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. [5] 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: honor 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. [6] 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.

2.52

430

2nd Year/Summer

ATHENS

The crowded and poor housing of the refugees aggravated the calamity. Burial and cremation rites were upset due to the large number of victims.

An aggravation of the existing calamity was the influx from the country into the city, and this was especially felt by the new arrivals. [2] 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. [3] 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. [4] 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 modes of burial: sometimes getting in first before

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 did just what they pleased, coolly venturing on what they had formerly done only in a corner, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. [2] So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day. [3] Perseverance in what men called honor 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 honorable and useful. [4] 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 offenses, 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.

Such was the nature of the calamity, and heavily did it weigh on the Athenians; death raging within the city and devastation without. [2] Among other things which they remembered in their distress was, very naturally, the following verse which the old men said had long ago been uttered:

A Dorian war shall come and with it pestilence.

2.53

430

2nd Year/Summer

ATHENS

Obsessed by death, men sought pleasure with no respect for honor, law, or the gods.

2.54

430

2nd Year/Summer

ATHENS

The Athenians argued about ancient prophecies and oracles. The plague struck Athens most severely and never entered the Peloponnesus.