

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War

[The plague] is said to have broken out previously in many other places, in the region of Lemnos and elsewhere, but there was no previous record of so great a pestilence and destruction of human life. The doctors were unable to cope, since they were treating the disease for the first time and in ignorance: indeed, the more they came into contact with sufferers, the more liable they were to lose their own lives. No other device of men was any help. Moreover, supplication at sanctuaries, resort to divination, and the like were all unavailing. In the end, people were overwhelmed by the disaster and abandoned efforts against it.

The plague is said to have come first of all from Ethiopia beyond Egypt and from there it fell on Egypt and Libya and on much of the [other] lands. It struck the city of Athens suddenly. People in the Piraeus caught it first, and so, since there were not yet any fountains there, they actually alleged that the Peloponnesians had put poison in the wells. Afterwards, it arrived in the upper city too, and then deaths started to occur on a much larger scale. Everyone, whether doctor or layman, may say from his own experience what the origin of it is likely to have been, and what causes he thinks had the power to bring about so great a change. I shall give a statement of what it was like, which people can study in case it should ever attack again, to equip themselves with foreknowledge so that they shall not fail to recognize it. I can give this account because I both suffered the disease myself and saw other victims of it.

It was universally agreed that this particular year was exceptionally free from disease as far as other afflictions were concerned. If people did first suffer from other illnesses, all ended in this. Others were caught with no warning, but suddenly, when they were in good health. The disease began with a strong fever in the head and reddening and burning in the eyes; the first internal symptoms were that the throat and tongue became bloody and the breath unnatural and malodorous. This was followed by sneezing and hoarseness, and in a short time the affliction descended to the chest, producing violent coughing. When it became established in the heart, it convulsed that and produced every kind of evacuation of bile known to the doctors, accompanied by great discomfort. Most victims then suffered from empty retching, which induced violent convulsion: they abated after this for some sufferers, but only much later for others.

The exterior of the body was not particularly hot to the touch or yellow, but was reddish, livid, and burst out in small blisters and sores. But inside the burning was so strong that the victims could not bear to put on even the lightest clothes and linens, but had to go naked, and gained the greatest relief by plunging into cold water. Many who had no one to keep watch on them even plunged into wells, under the pressure of insatiable thirst; but it made no difference whether they drank a large quantity or a small. Throughout the course of the disease, people suffered from sleeplessness and inability to rest. For as long as the disease was raging, the body did not waste away, but held out unexpectedly against its suffering. Most died about the seventh or the ninth day from the beginning of the internal burning, while they still had some strength. If they escaped then, the disease descended to the belly: there violent ulceration and totally fluid diarrhea occurred, and most people then died from the weakness caused by that.

The disease worked its way right through the body from the top, beginning with the affliction which first settled in the head. If anyone survived the worst symptoms, the disease left its **mark** by catching his extremities. It attacked the privy parts, and the fingers and toes, and many people survived but lost these, while others lost their eyes. Others, on first recovering, suffered a total loss of memory, and were unable to recognize themselves and their relatives.

The nature of the disease was beyond description, and the sufferings that it brought to each victim were greater than human nature can bear. There is one particular point in which it showed that it was unlike the usual run of illnesses: the birds and animals which feed on human flesh either kept away from the bodies, although there were many unburied, or if they did taste them it proved fatal. To confirm this, there was an evident shortage of birds of that kind, which were not to be seen either near the victims or anywhere else. What happened was particularly noticeable in the case of dogs, since they live with human beings.

Apart from the various unusual features in the different effects which it had on different people, that was the general nature of the disease. None of the other common afflictions occurred at that time; or any that did ended in this.

Some victims were neglected and died; others died despite a great deal of care. There was not a single remedy, you might say, which ought to be applied to give relief, for what helped one sufferer harmed another. No kind of constitution, whether strong or weak, proved sufficient against the plague, but it killed off all, whatever regime was used to care for them. The most terrifying aspect of the whole affliction was the despair which resulted when someone realized that he had the disease: people immediately lost hope, and so through their attitude of mind were much more likely to let themselves go and not hold out. In addition, one person caught the disease through caring for another, and so they died like sheep: this was the greatest cause of loss of life. If people were afraid and unwilling to go near to others, they died in isolation, and many houses lost all their occupants through the lack of anyone to care for them. Those who did go near to others died, especially those with any claim to virtue, who from a sense of honor did not spare themselves in going to visit their friends, persisting when in the end even the members of the family were overcome by the scale of the disaster and gave up their dirges for the dead.

Those who had come through the disease had the greatest pity for the suffering and dying, since they had previous experience of it and were now feeling confident for themselves, as the disease did not attack the same person a second time, or at any rate not fatally. Those who recovered were congratulated by the others, and in their immediate elation cherished the vain hope that for the future they would be immune to **death** from any other disease.

The distress was aggravated by the migration from the country into the city, especially in the case of those who had themselves made the move. There were no houses for them, so they had to live in stifling huts in the hot season of the year, and destruction raged unchecked. The bodies of the dead and dying were piled on one another and people at the point of death reeled about the streets and around all the springs in their passion to find water. The sanctuaries in which people were camping were filled with corpses, as deaths took place even there: the disaster was

overpowering, and as people did not know what would become of them, they tended to neglect the sacred and the secular alike. All the funeral customs which had previously been observed were thrown into confusion and the dead were buried in any way possible. Many who lacked friends, because so many had died before them, turned to shameless forms of disposal: some would put their own dead on someone else's pyre, and set light to it before those who had prepared it could do so themselves; others threw the body they were carrying on to the top of another's pyre when it was already alight, and slipped away.

In other respects, too, the plague marked the beginning of a decline to greater lawlessness in the city. People were more willing to dare to do things which they would not previously have admitted to enjoying, when they saw the sudden changes of fortune, as some who were prosperous suddenly died, and their property was immediately acquired by others who had previously been destitute. So they thought it reasonable to concentrate on immediate profit and pleasure, believing that their bodies and their possessions alike would be short-lived. No one was willing to persevere in struggling for what was considered an honorable result, since he could not be sure that he would not perish before he achieved it. What was pleasant in the short term, and what was in any way conducive to that, came to be accepted as honorable and useful. No fear of the gods or **law** of men had any restraining power, since it was judged to make no difference whether one was pious or not as all alike could be seen dying. No one expected to live long enough to have to pay the penalty for his misdeeds: people tended much more to think that a sentence already decided was hanging over them, and that before it was executed, they might reasonably get some enjoyment out of life.

So the Athenians had fallen into the great misfortune and were being ground down by it, with people dying inside the city and the land being laid waste outside.