

4. Thucydides and the plague of Athens (430-426 B.C.)



In ancient Greece epidemics were traditionally regarded as punishments exacted by a god for some violation of moral order. Transgression, pollution, and ritual purification were the three stages meant to describe a *crisis* in the relationship of humans to gods, and its resolution. A plague was the most conspicuous and aggressive outward sign of such a crisis.

From sources other than, and posterior to, Thucydides' work we learn that the traditional mode of action, i.e. ritual purification, was undertaken in Athens. According to one version of the story, the Athenians sent delegates to the Delphic Oracle and, on its advice, they purified the sacred isle of Delos, said to be defiled, by removing all graves to a nearby small island and by prohibiting future childbirths on its soil. According to another version of the story, the Delphic Oracle's injunction asked for the purification of Athens itself, and the Athenians officially brought a religious purifier from Crete to do the job. Thucydides, who mentions the purification of Delos, though not the apocryphal story about the Cretan purifier, refrains from causally connecting this religious ceremony to the actual end of the disease.

In the middle of the fifth century B.C., alongside the religious interpretation of epidemics, a new kind of exegesis was also taking shape. Hippocratic doctors, as distinct from religious healers, started giving rational explanations of diseases crucially based on the concept of a body's *nature*. A writer of such a persuasion went as far as to claim that the so-called "sacred disease", i.e. epilepsy, had nothing sacred about it but it was caused by natural, and exclusively physical, factors, like all other illnesses. Hippocratic doctors accounted for epidemics by recourse to environmental factors. All these factors came under the single noun of "diet", which originally meant "mode of life". Contagion from an infected individual to another was completely unknown then – and for many centuries to come.

Besides the religious and scientific accounts, another kind of causal explanation was circulating in Athens at the time, an explanation that we might call "political". People suspected that the Spartans had poisoned the wells of Piraeus, the harbour of Athens, where the epidemic first broke out.

When we turn to Thucydides' description of the plague with the above religious, medical and political contexts in mind, we are bound to be struck by Thucydides' *silences*. The gods, conspicuously absent as factors of historical determination in his narrative, are neither angry nor offended; they do not seek appeasement; they do not reply to prayers; they do not console their devotees: in short, they are afar and do not bother themselves with human affairs. Thucydides does not espouse the traditional scheme of explanation: the plague is *not* a god-sent punishment that calls for ritual purification. Nor does he espouse the scientific or political explanations, as we might perhaps expect him to do.

Thucydides' originality lies in the implicit rejection of all available kinds of explanation, religious, scientific and political alike. To his mind, all of them are *hypothetical constructions* meant to provide a framework of meaning for what is an inescapable fact of mortal life: the ever present possibility of a natural calamity and the intrinsic frailty of human existence vis-à-vis a whole range of phenomena (such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, droughts and, of course, epidemics) that do not fall within the power of human prediction or effective action. For Thucydides the plague, though amenable to a satisfactory description of its general symptomatology, defies human understanding.

According to Thucydides, the great number of deaths led to a neglect of burial customs. Archaeology has provided ample evidence for his claim. But the neglect of traditional ceremonies gradually led to more serious transgressions of social order. Lawlessness and unqualified hedonism won the day. Thucydides' description of the plague culminates in an account of the excessive *depoliticization* of life. Extreme situations, including natural calamities such as epidemics, tend to ruin political societies and to distort human nature – or, else, to manifest its latent potentialities for evil that lie dormant in ordinary circumstances. This is Thucydides' "lasting possession".

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