

THE PLAGUE OF ATHENS, 430-427 BC (SUMMARY)

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One of the earliest, and perhaps better known of the epidemics that struck the ancient world was the 'Plague of Athens'. The first outbreak occurred in the city in the early summer of 430 BC, in the second year of the Peloponnesian War, and continued until it died out in 427 BC. Not only was this plague the most famous, it might also be described as the most disastrous and fateful epidemic in the ancient world. It fell upon Athens, which in just two generations had begun to create and nurture such basic endeavours as philosophy, history, drama and primitive democracy. Her empire spanned much of the eastern Mediterranean. However, it took only thirty years for Athens to be defeated, and would never again reveal such energy and creativity.

Our knowledge of the plague is based almost entirely on the work of the soldier-turned-historian Thucydides. In chapters 47 to 54 of the second volume of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, he traces the origins of the epidemic and its course and, although not a physician, he describes the symptoms with great accuracy. He was one of the first to describe contagion and immunity.

This lecture discussed the nature of the epidemic, and tried to identify it from the symptoms described by Thucydides. Various diseases were examined, including typhus, measles, bubonic plague, gangrenous ergotism, smallpox, influenza, and even Ebola fever. However, there was always a major symptom of a particular disease missing, and therefore identifying the disease from the textual descriptions was dismissed. Discussed also was the question of whether the disease had occurred at all, or whether it was some localised incident that Thucydides had exaggerated, like the old soldier that he was, to try and explain the decline of Athens, her losses during the Peloponnesian War and the end of her economic domination, not to mention what he called 'turning away from the gods'. In fact, there is no corroborative evidence, textual, epigraphical, archaeological or pathological ('where are the thousands of bodies buried?') to suggest that the plague ever occurred!

The lecture concluded by looking at a number of ideas: is the epidemic

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unidentifiable because the pathogen has significantly changed? would we be able to identify it if we had some human skeletal remains from which nuclear DNA could be extracted?

Perhaps, in the end, it is best to remember the words of Terry Pratchett:

In the bathtub of history, the truth is harder to hold on to than the soap and much more difficult to find.