

The art of medicine

Plague and theatre in ancient Athens

As the Athenian historian Thucydides first pointed out in his account of the great plague of Athens during the late 5th century BCE, the social effects of epidemics can be at least as important as their biological impact. There have certainly been many plagues throughout recorded human history, but perhaps none arrived at such a pivotal moment in the affairs of a centre of western civilisation. Yet only recently have we been able to assess the true effect of the plague that first struck Athens in 430 BCE and continued intermittently for several years. New evidence from archaeology, modern medicine, historiography, theatre history, and literary criticism are all part of the story of how this plague, which arrived almost simultaneously with the onset of Athens' long war with her rival Sparta, altered the cradle of democracy.

Until a recent archaeological discovery, our understanding of what happened in Athens during the plague had been almost entirely reliant on the gripping narrative of Thucydides, which seems so dramatically shaped that some have wondered whether the historian embellished his vivid, harrowing eye-witness report. No other evidence seemed to have survived, save perhaps echoes in tragic dramas, the importance of which was largely overlooked by scholars who downplayed the relation between Athenian tragic drama and its immediate environment. It is a strange irony that the first real advance in our knowledge of the Athenian plague involved the Olympics—not the ancient games, but the modern version held in Athens during 2004. In 1998, as part of the various infrastructure projects in Athens, construction of a subway stop at the edge of the Kerameikos, the ancient cemetery just outside the city gates, revealed a wealth of surprises, including a mass grave. Analyses of votive pottery that accompanied the skeletons led the Greek archaeologist Efi Baziotopoulou-Valavani to date the grave to between 430 and 426 BCE, the precise years of the plague. But the corpses themselves seemed to have been simply dumped into the grave, without evidence of typical ancient funerary rituals, and the layers of corpses showed a progressive increase in anarchy.

This picture suggested a sense of mounting panic in the city, besieged from without by the Spartans, besieged from within by an epidemic of unprecedented virulence. Indeed, the two sieges were intimately connected, as the population of the Attic countryside had been compelled by the Athenian leader Pericles (himself an eventual plague victim) to move inside the city walls for protection from the enemy, thus overcrowding Athens and creating the ideal conditions for massive mortality from infection. The plague is thought to have killed a quarter to a third of the population during its course.

Although the findings at the Kerameikos offer a vivid snapshot of the Athenian state of mind at the plague's height, they have subsequently offered clues as to what, exactly, the plague was. Over the past century classical scholars and medical specialists have proposed various theories for its identity, ranging from smallpox to an ancient form of the Ebola virus. But now DNA extracted from the dental pulp of the victims has indicated that it was almost certainly another of the suspects: typhoid fever. This analysis remains controversial, although in my view it is compelling. But my interest lies not in what the plague was, but in what the panic it created meant for the Athenian social imagination, and what lasting mark it left on Athenian culture.

The plague left its marks most vividly and immediately in the tragic dramas produced in Athens during those years at the annual spring festival of Dionysus and then, around 420 BCE, in the construction of a sanctuary of the healing god Asclepius next to the Theatre of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis. Both the changes in the language of Athenian tragedy and this new building originate at least partly in the ancient Greek belief in the healing powers of song (what we would call poetry, since Greek poetry was chanted or sung). The plague thus affected the Theatre of Dionysus in two waves, and each wave is palpable in the language of the plays themselves.

Now, one must be careful in making any broad claim about Greek tragedy, since only a small proportion of the dramas staged in Athens during the 5th century BCE survived antiquity, and because we lack documentary evidence for their productions, often even the specific years of performance, but my analysis of the extant dramas shows that those that we know or suspect were produced during the plague exhibit a markedly higher incidence of words for disease, with heroes and communities from the mythical past in the throes of diseases both real and metaphorical.

Some scholars continue to insist that the case for the date of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is not watertight, but most have accepted Bernard Knox's arguments that both the broad setting of the Theban plague and a large number of textual details do not make much sense if Sophocles had not composed this tragedy in the light of, if not in response to, the Athenian plague. Other dramas from these years display a similarly high preponderance of disease imagery including Euripides' *Hippolytus* and, I argue controversially, Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, a drama about the death of Heracles that scholars have never been able to date with any certainty. On the basis of the high incidence of words for illness and the striking resemblance of the physical suffering of Heracles, dying from the poison left to him by the Centaur Nessus, to the plague victims described

by Thucydides, I suggest that Sophocles also composed *Women of Trachis* as a reaction to the plague.

Sophocles' specific vocabulary for plague in *Oedipus the King* shows the deep and dangerously volatile relations between epidemic and tragic drama. Greek literature uses the words *nosos* to signify disease in general and *loimos* for plague in particular, but the latter term, during the last three decades of the 5th century, virtually disappears from Greek literature. While *loimos* appears twice in the earlier tragedies of Aeschylus, who died in 454 BCE, it never does so in the 18 extant dramas of Euripides, and then only once in the seven of Sophocles. This instance is line 28 of *Oedipus the King*, when the Priest details the Theban plague's effects to Oedipus. That this is the one tragedy where one would expect to find the word recurring frequently and the careful climax of the speech's rhetoric around *loimos*, combined with this word's disappearance from Athenian literature, suggests that Sophocles is signalling that *loimos* is an "inauspicious word", one generally regarded as taboo and unspeakable. It is possible that the depiction of a fictional plague to an audience that was still suffering from a real one, and in language regarded as dangerous in itself, was responsible for Sophocles' unusual second-place finish in the competition among tragedians at the festival of Dionysus that year. A city that believed its gods had abandoned it could not be too careful.

A few years later, during a truce in the Peloponnesian War, some Athenians, perhaps including Sophocles himself, imported the cult of Asclepius, son of Apollo and the Greek god of healing. Early during the plague, Athens had attacked the home of Asclepius, Epidaurus, presumably with the goal of acquiring the cult by force. With a new building programme launched during the truce, Athens installed Asclepius on the south slope of the Acropolis, at the upper western edge of the Theatre of Dionysus. Given the Greek belief in the healing powers of song, this placement was not coincidental and in subsequent centuries the configuration of Asclepius' sanctuary and theatre was repeated throughout the Greek world, not least in the home of Asclepius, Epidaurus' 4th-century theatre, with its superlative acoustics, is the most famous of all ancient Greek theatres in the modern world.

The theatre, the Athenian imagination thus suggests, can heal, but what exactly the Athenians thought it might heal must be drawn inferentially from a range of texts. Of course, they must have believed that Asclepius would help avert a recurrence of the plague, but a new wave of disease imagery in Athenian drama after the construction of the sanctuary, the added political metaphors in this imagery, combined with the growing political strife in Athens, all combine to indicate that theatre was becoming instrumental in the health of the body politic. Indeed, the pre-Hippocratic writer Alcmaeon, who might have invented this metaphor, cast health as a balanced constitution of the body's elements, with equal rights, and illness as a form of political factionalism, stasis,



Oedipus and Antigone being exiled to Thebes (1843) by Eugene-Ernest Hillemaecher

wherein one element gains a "monarchy". Such conceptual language pervades Athenian tragedy in plays ranging from Euripides' *Heracles* to Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In other words, the tragic poets are healers of the city.

In Thucydides' account of these years, the language of the plague's assault on Athens recurs during the fevered debate in the Athenian Assembly over the proposed invasion of Sicily, despite 15 years of war with Sparta. Thucydides reports that the Athenian general Nicias, in a speech opposed to the invasion, counselled the legislators that those who voted against the new war would become doctors to the city. On the eve of the expedition, vandalism to religious icons produced a mass hysteria unseen since the plague, and a witchhunt led to the condemnation and exile of Alcibiades, the flamboyant, aristocratic general who had heatedly urged the invasion of Sicily. The subsequent catastrophic losses there were the plague's only real rival in weakening Athens before its eventual defeat by Sparta a decade later.

The issues surrounding the war's conduct and the general political health of Athens were debated in the theatre, the sanctuary of Dionysus, regularly between 430 and 404 BCE. After 420 BCE, these debates were overseen, literally, by Asclepius, the god of healing, because of the plague that Thucydides had seen inciting a decline in social conduct and morality—the health of the body politic. Poets could heal, but only so much, perhaps because their patient became unwilling to listen.

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Further Reading

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