

Plagues in Ancient Greece and Rome

Michael Sage

The dangers that COVID-19 poses both to us and to our world are nothing new. If anything, the menace of infectious diseases was far more threatening to the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Plague appears at the very beginning of Western literature. The Iliad, the great poem ascribed to Homer describing the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, opens with a plague. The priest of Apollo, Chryses, approaches Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army besieging Troy, to beg Agamemnon to release his daughter Chryseis. He brings a ransom accompanied by the symbols of the god. Despite his plea, Agamemnon spurns him. He does it in a brutal way, makes it clear he will not give the girl up, and threatens the priest if he ever finds him again near the Greek ships. The priest prays to Apollo, asking to send a disaster upon the Greeks for what has happened. The archer god, enraged by the way his priest has been treated, obliges his priest. His arrows of death strike down animals and then men in the Greek camp. For nine days men died in droves.

Finally, Agamemnon gives way and the priest's daughter Chryseis is returned to her father, but not before a quarrel breaks out between Agamemnon and the greatest fighter in the Greek camp, Achilles. It is the quarrel that forms the real subject matter of the poem.

The story that opens the poem brings together a number of elements that marked the ancient experience of infectious diseases. It illustrates the role of Apollo as the bringer of plague and death. Like ice cream, the god came in

many flavors. The god that Chryses prayed to was Apollo Smintheus who as the "mouse-god" was associated with plagues. Both he and his sister Artemis, the Roman Diana, were associated with sudden death, he in men and she in women, especially during childbirth. It points to what seems to have been a common ancient explanation for epidemics, that they were the work of a divine force and punishment for some human transgression. Both the Greeks and Romans had deities connected with epidemics and other forms of illness. Apollo in his various forms not only sends plagues but can end them. The prime healing god in Greece and Rome was Apollo's son Asclepius. His reputation as a healing god was so great that in 293 BC, because of a plague, the Romans brought the god to the city and built a temple for him. The plague then stopped. Other deities were also associated with illness and epidemics. The Romans had a specific temple dedicated to the goddess Fever. The sources are full of these deities. It seems likely that most people viewed plagues and epidemics as caused by a divine power of some sort and so thought they could be treated by appeasing those powers with prayers, rituals, and sacrifices.

The plague in Homer also illustrates another aspect of infectious illness in antiquity as well as in the modern world. That is the relationship between crowding and the intensity of infectious diseases. Crowding in camps, as well as their lack of sanitation, created a perfect environment for the transmission of infectious diseases. All pre-modern

armies lost far more men to disease than to enemy action. This was particularly true when, as at Troy, they were conducting a siege and so stationary for a long period. Lack of sanitary facilities and close quarters contributed to the rapid spread of disease.

Besieging armies were cities in miniature, and it was in cities that epidemics and plagues struck the hardest. They were incubators of disease and suffered from endemic infectious disease which often remained dormant for part of the year and then broke out, often at the same time, every year.

For instance in Rome, the most populous city in the Roman Empire, with close to one million inhabitants, appalling poverty, crowding and unsanitary conditions, malaria, typhus and tuberculosis became a permanent part of the population, breaking out mostly during the summer and early fall. Cities were also commercial and trading centers where ships often landed their cargoes and epidemics. Descriptions of epidemics and plagues in antiquity often mention their having come by ships from overseas. This was also true of the arrival of the Black Death in Europe in 1347.

The first detailed account of a plague occurs in the history of the great war between the two most powerful Greek states, Athens and Sparta that lasted from 431-404 BC. The plague broke out in the second year of the war, 430. Thucydides, who had had the plague and recovered, writes that it was thought to have come from Egypt and first broke out in Piraeus, the port of Athens. It quickly spread to the main part of the city. Curiously, Thucydides mentions that the year had been particularly free of disease before

the onset of the epidemic, which lasted two full years and then reoccurred shortly after.

The writer describes the symptoms and the course of the disease. He notes that Athens was then under siege by the Spartans and that people from the countryside had fled within the city walls, which made overcrowding and the spread of the disease even worse. He mentions that the number of deaths was overwhelming with bodies lying in the streets.

Together with the staggering number of the dead, he paints a picture of the breakdown of social norms. Men saw the good and the bad dying arbitrarily and so felt free to do what they wanted. As Thucydides writes: "As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately." Given the usual view ascribing plagues to the will of the gods, this was a striking effect of the disease. There is no consensus about what the disease was. But it was probably a disease that died out long ago with no modern descendants.

Thucydides mentions both the attempt by doctors to treat the disease and their succumbing to it. He does not describe the treatments used. Ancient medical writings hardly deal with epidemics beyond describing them. It was not until the late nineteenth century that the theory that many diseases were caused by microscopic organisms gained ground and finally triumphed. In essence, ancient medical science had no answer to the spread of infectious diseases beyond avoiding contact and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

A number of plagues are mentioned in Roman sources. A particularly destructive one broke out in the Roman Empire in the 160s AD lasting into the 180s, which may have killed a quarter of the empire's inhabitants. The general view is that it was smallpox. We next hear of a further serious plague in the 250s.

The most devastating epidemic of all broke out in the mid-sixth century in the

eastern half of the Empire; it was probably bubonic plague. Perhaps more than one-third of the empire's population died. It had serious political and economic repercussions. It severely weakened the empire at a time when threats to it had multiplied. It was the last serious plague of European antiquity. As Covid has made clear, the possibility of catastrophe that epidemics and plague threaten will always be with us.

Michael Sage, PhD, is a professor emeritus for the University of Cincinnati, where he taught in the Classics Department for thirty-five years and also served as head of the Classics Department. He moved to San Diego in 2010 and taught at UCSD as a visiting professor. He has published a number of books on religious, intellectual, and military history in Greek and Roman civilization. His latest book is a study of the Emperor Septimius Severus, who reigned at the end of the second century AD, at a critical time in the empire's existence. In addition, he has published a number of articles and encyclopedia entries on classical subjects. Since joining the San Diego Independent Scholars, he has given several talks on various topics.

This essay was sent to SDIS in September 2020.

Reprinted from *COVID-19: getting through with wit and grit*, published by the San Diego Independent Scholars. 2020 (<https://sdscholars.org>) © Michael Sage.