



Thucydides' Account of the Athenian Plague

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Abstract

This paper offers a reading of Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague from a modern perspective of someone who has observed or directly experienced “*ta symbebekota*” of Covid-19. “*Ta symbebekota*” refers to those phenomena that were not only consequences but also accompaniments of the Athenian plague. In addition, I look into a point that seems to have been overlooked by Thucydides in his account of the plague and offer two reasons for it. Finally, there are suggestions why Thucydides should still be read.

Keywords: Thucydides, Pericles, Euripides, Heracles, loimos, Peloponnesian war, democracy, Covid-19.

Thucydides' account of Athenian Plague (430 B.C.) is a *locus classicus* for a discussion of epidemics, which is evident in the history of its reception. According to J. S. Rusten,

[T]he scientific value of the description is less notable than its literary impact¹: here begins a tradition of plague-narratives stretching from Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 6. 1138-1286 (often virtually a translation of Thucydides, as is Ovid, *Met.* 7. 523-81), and Vergil (*Georgics* 3. 478-566, a livestock plague), through Procopius (*De bello Persico* 2.22) and Bocaccio (*Decameron*, Proem) to Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* : Camus' *La Peste* and Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. (179-180)

To this list belongs also *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* by García Márquez. Following the outbreak of Covid-19, however, scientific analysis of the Athenian plague has now increased among scholars.² Some have tried to identify the disease, *loimos*, as smallpox; some as

¹ See Morgan.

² Confer Littman.

epidemic typhus.³ Almost 30 different diseases have been suggested as candidates for the kind of disease.⁴ For the sake of distinction, I use the Athenian term *loimos* to refer to it.⁵ It is interesting to see is that people are now talking more frequently about what can be learned from Thucydides' account in experiencing and facing up to the social clashes of Covid-19 personally and directly.⁶ In this regard, it is important to point out that scholars are mostly of the same opinion, that Thucydides' accounts concerning the social *symbebekota* of the Athenian *loimos* are truthful, and useful for an understanding and analysis in global terms of social disorder, political division, and what has become known as "fake news". Evidence for this is the fake news or conspiracy theory that was dominant among Athenians regarding the cause and origin of *loimos*:

[*Loimos*] fell on the city of Athens suddenly. The first affected were the inhabitants of the Piraeus, who went so far as to allege that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the wells (at that time there were no fountains in the Piraeus). (Thucydides 2.48. 2.)

Remarkably, however, scholarship on this issue devotes little attention to analyzing and estimating the *symbebekota* of the *loimos*, just as some discussions of Covid-19 do now.⁷ I think the issue of the *symbebekota* of the Athenian *loimos* deserves to be discussed. However, it is not easy to find textual substantiations that can explain the *symbebekota*, partly because of the lack of evidence and partly of the ongoing Peloponnesian War. But Thucydides did mention it clearly, though briefly.

Such was the affliction which had come on the Athenians and was pressing them hard – people dying inside the city, and the devastation of their land outside. In this time of trouble, as tends to happen, they recalled a verse which the old men said was being chanted long ago: 'A Dorian war come, and bring a pestilence with it.' People have disputed whether the original word in the verse was *limos* ('famine') rather than *loimos* ('pestilence'), but not surprisingly in the present situation the prevailing view is that 'pestilence' was the word used. Men accommodate their memories to their current experience. I imagine that if at some time another 'Dorian war' comes next after this one, with famine coinciding, the verse will in all likelihood be recited with that meaning. Those who knew of it also remembered the oracle given to the Spartans, when they enquired whether they should go to war and the god answered that they would win if they fought in earnest, and said that he himself would take their side. The general surmise

³ Confer Papagrigorakis et al.

⁴ See Papagrigorakis et al.

⁵ See Mitchell-Boyask, "Materials 1: The language of disease in tragedy," 18-44.

⁶ See Kelaidis; Fins.

⁷ Confer Malbeuf et al.

was that the facts fitted the oracle. The plague had indeed begun immediately after the Peloponnesians had invaded, and it never reached the Peloponnese to any significant extent, but spread particularly in Athens and later in other densely populated areas. So much for the facts of the plague. (Thucydides 2.54)

Three points stand out from this citation. Firstly, Thucydides' account was written not at the time of *loimos* but quite some time later. The disputation about the "original word" for "pestilence" confirms this. Some people contend that it was written at the time of the plague, but that is not substantiated by the remark "Men accommodate their memories to their current experience." It is also confirmed by the remark "[T]he result – inevitable in a great city with an empire to rule – was a series of mistakes, most notably the Sicilian expedition" (Thucydides 2. 65). The account of the Athenian *loimos* thus must have been written after the Sicilian expedition. Secondly, the *loimos* did not invade the region of Peloponnesus: the war functioned as a kind of vaccine to the Peloponnesians. The final thing to point out is that the account of the Athenian *loimos* was a recollection on the part of Thucydides, and I believe this is the primary reason for assuming why he was not able to give an account of *ta symbekota* of the *loimos*. For the same reason, scholarship has also generally explained the social disorder and political conflict in the Athenian *polis* from the perspectives of the war and of the immaturity of Athenian democracy.⁸ In my view, however, the *loimos*, together with the war, also might have had a decisive influence on the dissolution of traditional societies and the formation of new ones, because the fear of death that accompanied the plague dismantled the traditional value system of Athens⁹ and the existing political hierarchy and order¹⁰, as is manifest in Thucydides' own remarks:

No fear of god or human law was any constraint. Pious or impious made no difference in their view when they could see all dying without distinction. As for offences against the law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to justice and pay the penalty: they thought that a much heavier sentence had already been passed and was hanging over them, so they might as well have some enjoyment of life before it fell. (Thucydides 2. 53)

This citation testifies to a social and political dismantling of the Athenian *polis* by the *loimos*. To demonstrate this more vividly, I would like to show a painting of Michiel Sweerts (1618-84) which depicts Thucydides' account of the *loimos*.

⁸ On this see in general Kagan.

⁹ On this, see Nielsen.

¹⁰ Confer Orwin.



Plague in an Ancient City, *circa* 1652-54¹¹

This painting shows the absolute despair of the Athenians. The *polis* has lost its direction. It is needless to repeat Thucydides' passage here again.¹² To cut a long story short, two features stand out. One is the empty building at the top of the picture, which is an allegory of a country that has disappeared; the other is that there is no cure for the disaster of the *loimos*: the doctor himself is in confusion. Neither gods nor family can be of any help in this situation, and Thucydides was an eyewitness to all this.

The doctors could offer little help at first: they were attempting to treat the disease without knowing what it was, and in fact there was particularly high mortality among doctors because of their particular exposure. No other human skill could help either, and all supplications at temples and consultations of oracles and the like were of no avail. In the end the people were overcome by the disaster and abandoned all efforts to escape it. (Thucydides 2. 47)

The scene painted by Sweerts is, however, a work of imagination based on a misunderstanding of history, because the war broke out at almost the same time as the *loimos* devastated the Athens *polis*. This means that there would have existed a strong government at the time. When the *loimos* visited Athens, Pericles was active as a statesman. The city needed at that time also to be united unanimously against the Spartans and, needless to say, Pericles' leadership was a strong and firm one. Hence, what should be seen more closely is that Athens was invaded by

¹¹ This is exhibited now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The image shown is taken from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plague_in_an_Ancient_City_LACMA_AC1997.10.1_\(1_of_2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plague_in_an_Ancient_City_LACMA_AC1997.10.1_(1_of_2).jpg).

¹² On this see more in details J. Ahn (2020). <아테네 판데믹: 역병은 어떤 정치를 요구하는가? [Athene Pandemic: Yeokbyung-eun Eoddeon Jeongchi-leul Yoguhaneunga?] On Athenian loimos: What Politics is Required in the Pandemics?).

two enemies simultaneously, one a visible foe, the Lacedaemonians; the other, an “unseen ruin,” *loimos*. That term “unseen ruin” is drawn from Sophocles’ *The Women of Trachis*.

Countless have been the labors I endured
and none has ever triumphed over me.
But now, my limbs disjointed, torn to shreds,
I lie here vanquished by an unseen ruin –
I whom they say a noble mother bore,
I whom am called the son of starry Zeus. (*The Women of Trachis*, 1102-06)

“Unseen ruin” is a translation of “τοφλῆς ὑπ’ ἄτης.” When considered in the light of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos* which deals with the subject of *loimos* directly and explicitly,¹³ the “ἄτη τοφλή” here also clearly refers to the *loimos*, and from this, it is also clear that the Athenians had to fight against two enemies. I would suppose that the number of those who fell victim to the *loimos* was greater than the number who were killed in the war.¹⁴ However, it is difficult to invoke the struggle against the *loimos* in some warlike rhetorical slogan against Covid-19 now: all the Athenians could do was just to endure and to pray for the mercy of Zeus or the natural extinction of the plague. Hence, the situation of being under attack by two enemies obviously posed a dilemma for them: they had to unite solidly against the visible enemy, but could not gather together in one place against the invisible invader;¹⁵ the more closely they gathered, the greater would be the numbers who died.

Thucydides talked little about this dilemma, as we saw, which can be explained by the fact that on one hand, the account was made some time after the events, and, on the other, that *ta symbebekota* of the *loimos* were considered to be consequences of the war and of the immaturity of Athenian democracy linked to social divisions and conflict in the *polis*. Thucydides observed these from the perspectives of the war and of the immaturity of the Athenian citizens.¹⁶ Comparing the Athenian *loimos* with the modern-day Covid-19, however, there is a point to be noted, namely, that there might have been a crisis of political leadership caused by the *loimos*. This is not laid out in Thucydides’ account and so is not obviously apparent. But having “two wars” to fight at the same time presented a dilemma: to survive one, the Athenians had to be scattered, but to win the other, they needed to gather together. To fight the invisible invader, they needed to keep “social distance”, but against the visible enemy, they had to unite and gather in close proximity. Of course, there was no quarantine policy at that

¹³ See, R. Mitchell-Boyask, “5. Oedipus and the plague,” 56-66.

¹⁴ See Kagan, 106-107. According to him, more than 30 % of the population were sacrificed by the *loimos*.

¹⁵ Confer Page, “The Plague is a πάθος, like war and in fact, it is a partner of war,” 115.

¹⁶ On this in general, see Kagan, 424-468.

time, so survival depended entirely on luck. Nonetheless, accordingly, it is certain that the *loimos* carried the political leadership into crisis. This is what Thucydides has to say:

After the second Peloponnesian invasion, with their land devastated for the second time, and under the trouble burden of plague and war, the Athenians suffered a change of mind. They now began to blame Pericles for persuading them to war and held him responsible for the disasters that had befallen them: and they were ready to make terms with the Spartans – they did in fact send embassies to Sparta, without effect. Reduced to complete desperation, they turned on Pericles. He could see that they were resentful at the present situation and were reacting in all the ways which he had privately predicted: so he called a meeting (he was still general) with the intention of stiffening their resolve and drawing them away from anger to a more benign and confident frame of mind. (Thucydides 2.59)

Concerning in particular the discussion of the social *symbebekota* of the Athenian *loimos*, it is unfortunate that the *loimos* was not cited as significantly by Thucydides as were the war and the immaturity of democracy. There may have been two reasons for this: one, as seen earlier, that the account itself was a recollection; the other, that it is not easy to distinguish *ta symbebekota* of the *loimos* from those consequences that always come together with political crises.¹⁷ With regard to the latter, Thucydides sa:

What was happening was democracy in name, but in fact the domination of the leading man. Pericles' successors were more on a level with one another, and because each was striving for first position they were inclined to indulge popular whim even in matters of state policy. The result – inevitable in a great city with an empire to rule – was a series of mistakes, most notably the Sicilian expedition. The error here was not so much a mistaken choice of enemy as the failure of those at home to relate their further decisions to the interests of the force they had sent out. Instead they allowed personal accusations made in the pursuit of political supremacy to blunt the effectiveness of the military, and for the first time there was factional discord in the city. (Thucydides 2.65)

Thucydides cites two problems. One is the whim of Athenian democracy, the other is the consolidation of tyranny. They brought the Athenian *polis* not only into the crisis which was described as “factional discord in the city,” but also to a crushing defeat in the war. Thucydides mentions the Sicilian expedition as an example. What is interesting to see is that there is a similarity between *loimos* and tyranny: both are the inner enemy of the *polis*. They divide a *polis* into two bodies and turn citizens into opponents of each other, just as we have seen in the social and political divide in the recent presidential election in the United States. Sometimes, therefore, the inner enemies are more perilous than the enemies who attack from outside. I

¹⁷ Confer Orwin 841-843.

think the most dangerous thing was the triad of war together with tyranny and *loimos*; and in the early period of the war, the Athenian *polis* underwent this triple yoking.

To return to the point, this issue of the dilemma between war and *loimos*, as we have seen, went almost unnoticed by Thucydides. Thus, I would here call on Euripides, whose play *Heracles mainomenos* might have been staged between 422 BCE and 416.¹⁸ According to my reading, this drama was influenced by the *loimos*, just as *Oedipus the King*¹⁹ and *The Women of Trachis*²⁰ of Sophocles were. It is remarkable that Heracles in Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* is portrayed as a political victim of Deaneira's false judgment based on "fake news." In contrast, Heracles in *Heracles mainomenos* is presented as a political leader who misused his power at a cost to his family and people, not to his enemies, even though Theseus, at the end of the play, extols him as "the benefactor and great friend to mortals" (*Heracles mainomenos*, 1252). Heracles, engulfed by madness, slaughters his family – the savior turns into a destroyer. The power that liberated Thebes also destroys Thebes. From the perspective of mythology, this can be explained by the wrath of Hera; seen politically, however, the sudden change in Heracles is deliberately planned to make clear how terrifying is his leadership, so vitally important in the war against external enemies, but unacceptable when it comes to internal politics. In addition, this leadership could only be disastrous in the case of a war against an invisible enemy like *loimos*; in such a war, undoubtedly, a leadership based on patience and prudence is required. Amphitryon, the biological father of Heracles, asks him explicitly to have patience:

My son, it is like you to show your love for your dear ones
and your hate for your enemies, only curb excessive hastiness.
(*Heracles mainomenos*, 585-586)

To make a long story short, let us then ask whether Heracles, a savior from external enemies and liberator of people from natural calamities, is fitted to be a proper fighter and leader facing the dilemma of war and *loimos*. He is not a suitable leader because while he could be welcomed in the war against the Spartans, he would not be against an unseen enemy. In this situation, his leadership becomes terrifying in the face of a combined attack from an external enemy and from the *loimos* coming at the same time. It is for this reason that Heracles in *Heracles mainomenos* is said to have been killed by the attack of an unseen enemy. Thus far, Heracles is considered to be a tragic hero²¹ because he didn't know how perilous his power could be

¹⁸ Confer Mitchell-Boyask, "1. Materials 1: The language of disease in tragedy," 29-30.

¹⁹ Confer Mitchell-Boyask, "5. Oedipus and the plague," 56-66.

²⁰ Confer Mitchell-Boyask, "6. *The Trachinae* and the plague," 67-104.

²¹ Confer Stafford, Ch. 3, "The Tragic Hero," and Ch. 4 "Vice and Virtue Incarnate."

not only to his family but also to himself.²² This issue is not stressed by Thucydides; to be sure, he does give emphasis to evoke the prudent and solid leadership of a statesman like Pericles, manifest in the fact that he places the account of the *loimos* between two speeches in which Pericles praises and even glorifies the greatness of the Athenian polis in contrast to the anomie of the city's society under *loimos*.²³ Moreover, Thucydides portrays the *polis* at the time of the Sicilian expedition as a "headless state" (ἄκεφαλη πόλις).²⁴ The issue underlined by Thucydides was a leadership that fell between a combination of tyranny and the whim of democracy.²⁵ Seen metaphorically, this leadership itself was an "unseen ruin," a description that also applies to the leadership of Heracles, because he failed to realize that the way to keep courage from turning into madness was to be prudent, not to be hasty. Intoxicated with his power, he slaughtered his family as he killed Lykos.

With regard to the discussion of leadership, one may point out that the maxim "to show your love for your dear ones and your hate for your enemies" goes back to the old idea of justice based on the principle of "*suum cuique* (to each his own)".²⁶ It is *iustitia distributiva*. Looked at from this point of view, it can be said that Heracles' leadership may be categorized as *iustitia distributiva*. One may ask then whether leadership based on distributive justice is suitable in the event of a dilemma and whether it is always right and justified.²⁷ One can answer this by saying that it is not always right, as we see in the case of Heracles' leadership and the tragic end of an Athenian leadership rooted in tyranny coupled with partisanship.²⁸ Even at a rough guess, I would argue that a significant change in the understanding of the idea of justice took place during the Peloponnesian War, but one cannot undervalue the role of the *loimos* in the shift of world view and the way of seeing and coping with everyday life. This is manifest in the remarks of Thucydides:

In other respects too the plague was the beginning of increased lawlessness in the city. People were less inhibited in the indulgence of pleasures previously concealed when they saw the rapid changes of fortune – the prosperous suddenly dead, and the once indigent now possessing their fortune. As a result they decided to look for satisfactions that were quick and pleasurable, reckoning that neither life nor wealth would last long. No one was prepared to persevere in what had once been thought the path of honour, as

²² Confer Hsu, Ch.4, "Coping with Violence: Victory and Friendship."

²³ Confer Fins.

²⁴ Confer Jang.

²⁵ Confer Lee.

²⁶ Confer Plato, *Republic*, 1.332 c.

²⁷ Confer Mara, Ch. 5, "Proximate Others."

²⁸ KConfer Hsu, Ch.4, "Coping with Violence: Victory and Friendship in Euripides' Heracles."

they could well be dead before that destination was reached. Immediate pleasure, and any means profitable to that end, became the new honour and the new value. No fear of god or human law was any constraint. Pious or impious made no difference in their view, when they see all dying without distinction. As for offences against law, none expected to live long enough to be brought to justice and pay the penalty: they thought that a much heavier sentence had already been passed and was hanging over them, so they might as well have some enjoyment of life before it fell. (Thucydides 2.53)

The citation makes clear that there was a great change of thought, view and even of *modus vivendi*. This kind of change was definitely affected by the *loimos*, not by the war that required a strong and conservative ideology. Thucydides considers the change in Athens as a move to decadence and anomie. From a modern perspective, however, it can be viewed as a deconstruction of old traditions for the resetting of a new society. Here one can say that the *symbebekota* were not entirely negative, but rather they brought about some positive outcomes because the *loimos* forced people to think about matters such as what is just and how to live one's life. For instance, the traditional justice of "*suum cuique*" was challenged in the face of the dilemma, as seen also in the case of Heracles, because it is necessary to find a new understanding of justice when faced with a dilemma and under attack by an "unseen ruin." It was not a happening that prompted Plato to try to find a new and deeper understanding of justice in the *Republic*, because the old idea of justice based on "to show your love for your dear ones and your hate for your enemies" is not always applicable and indeed sometimes very dangerous both to *polis* and citizen.²⁹ In regard to this, Plato writes:

"[Socrates] Good. In the same way tell me the art that renders what to whom would be dominated justice." [Polemarchos] "If we are to follow the previous examples, Socrates, it is that which renders benefits and harms to friends and enemies." [Socrates] "To do good to friends and evil to enemies, then, is justice in his meaning?" [Polemarchos] "I think so." (...) [Socrates] Shall we also say this that for those who are not at war the just man is useless? [Polemarchos] "By no means." [Socrates] "There is a use then even in peace for justice?" [Polemarchos] "Yes, it is useful." (...) [Socrates] "Then tell me, for the service and getting of what would you say that justice is useful in time of peace?" [Polemarchos] "In engagements and dealings, Socrates." (*Republic* 332d - 333a)

Two points stand out here. One is that Plato points to the notion of commutative justice to amend the problem of distributive justice. The other is that the maxim "to do good to friends and evil to enemies" was a definition first offered by Simonides. As a matter of fact, this old justice was firmly rooted in the soul of Athenians because it had been praised earlier by Odysseus:

²⁹ Confer Mara. Ch. 4, 'Culture's Justice.'

For nothing is greater or better than this, when man and wife dwell in a home in one accord, a great grief to their foes and a joy to their friends. (*Odyssey*, 6. 182-84)

This justice, I think, is a natural principle of living beings.³⁰ It is thus a difficult task to suggest a new understanding of it. But Plato did succeed in supplementing or amending the idea of justice. The point is that he could not have succeeded in doing so without the *loimos*, because the state of anomie had previously arisen, and the traditional morals and ethics were already undermined by that plague.

To conclude, it is at last time to answer the question of why to read Thucydides. To do this, a comparison of the Athenian *loimos* with Covid-19 is called for. Against Covid-19, we have a vaccine and also a quarantine policy. Against the *loimos*, Athenians had no vaccine, and it was impossible for the *polis* even to think about any quarantine policy. The *loimos* as a natural disease is different from Covid-19 in this respect. But seen as social diseases, the two are almost the same. Rather to say, the case of Covid-19 as a social disease is much more terrifying than the Athenian *loimos* in the sense that the latter was a national epidemic, while the first is a global pandemic, moreover coming in tandem with climate change. Nobody knows now what will come next. Even so, what is not changed is that the *symbekota* of the virus as a social disease, whatever they may be, play out in almost the same pattern. The reason why we should read Thucydides is made clear when he is viewed from this perspective. The ‘unseen ruin’ of society has never been changed and even is getting stronger.

³⁰ On this, see further, Plato. *Republic*, 335 d-336 a, *Crito* 49 b-c; Xenophon. *Memorabilia* 2.3.14, 2.6..35; Isocrates 1. 26; Pindar. *Pythian* 2.85; Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 123.

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