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The Peloponnesian War



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With an Introduction and Notes by

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‘If I may speak also of the duty of those wives who will now be widows, a brief exhortation will say it all. Your great virtue is to show no more weakness than is inherent in your nature, and to cause least talk among males for either praise or blame.

- 46 ‘I have made this speech as custom demands, finding the most suitable words I could. The honour expressed in ceremony has now been paid to those we came to bury: and in further tribute to them the city will maintain their children at public expense from now until they come of age. This is the valuable crown which in contests such as these the city confers on the dead and those they leave behind. The state which offers the greatest prizes for valour also has the bravest men for citizens.

‘And now it is time to leave, when each of you has made due lament for your own.’

- 47 Such was the funeral held in this winter: and with the passing of winter there ended the first year of this war.

At the very beginning of the next summer the Peloponnesians and their allies invaded Attica, with two-thirds of their forces as on the first occasion, under the command of Archidamus the son of Zeuxidamus, king of Sparta. They settled in and began to ravage the land.

They had not been in Attica for more than a few days when the plague first broke out in Athens. It is said that the plague had already struck widely elsewhere, especially in Lemnos and other places, but nowhere else was there recorded such virulence or so great a loss of life. 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.

- 48 The original outbreak, it is said, was in Ethiopia, the far side of Egypt: the plague then spread to Egypt and Libya, and over much of the King’s territory. It fell on the city of Athens suddenly. The first affected were the inhabitants of the Peiraeus, who went so far as to allege that the Peloponnesians had poisoned the wells (at that time there were no fountains in the Peiraeus). Afterwards the plague reached the upper city too, and now the number of deaths greatly increased. Others, doctors or laymen, can give their individual opinions of the

likely origin of the plague, and of the factors which they think significant enough to have had the capacity to cause such a profound change. But I shall simply tell it as it happened, and describe the features of the disease which will give anyone who studies them some prior knowledge to enable recognition should it ever strike again. I myself caught the plague, and witnessed others suffering from it.

It so happened that this year was commonly agreed to have been particularly free from other forms of illness, though anyone with a previous condition invariably developed the plague. The other victims were in good health until, for no apparent cause, they were suddenly afflicted. The first symptoms were a high fever in the head and reddening and inflammation of the eyes; then internally the throat and tongue began to bleed and the breath had an unnaturally foul smell. There followed sneezing and hoarseness of voice, and shortly the affliction moved down to the chest accompanied by a violent cough. When it settled in the stomach the turmoil caused there led to the voiding of bile in every form for which the doctors have a name, all this with great pain. Most then suffered from an empty retching which brought violent spasms: in some this followed as soon as the vomiting had abated, in others much later.

The surface of the body was not particularly hot to the touch or pallid, but reddish and livid, breaking out in small pustules and ulcers. But the sensation of burning heat inside the body was so strong that sufferers could not bear the pressure of even the lightest clothing or sheets, or anything other than going naked, and their greatest wish was to plunge into cold water. Many who had no one to look after them did in fact throw themselves into cisterns, overcome by an insatiable thirst: but as a rule the quantity of water drunk made no difference. A constant infliction was desperate restlessness and the inability to sleep. Throughout the height of the disease there was no wasting of the body, but a surprising physical resilience to all the suffering, so that there was still some strength in them when the majority died from the internal fever after six to eight days. If they survived this period most others died from the consequent weakness when the disease spread down to the bowels causing heavy ulceration and the onset of completely liquid diarrhoea.

The disease first settled in the head then progressed throughout the whole body from the top downwards. If any survived the worst effects, symptoms appeared when the disease took hold in their extremities. It attacked genitals, fingers, and toes, and many lived on

with these parts lost: some too lost their sight. There were those who on recovery suffered immediate and total loss of memory, not knowing who they were and unable to recognize their friends.

50 Indeed the pathology of the disease defied explanation. Not only did it visit individuals with a violence beyond human endurance, but there was also this particular feature which put it in a different category from all other diseases with which we are familiar: although many bodies lay unburied, the birds and animals which prey on human flesh kept away from them, or, if they did eat, died of it. Evidence of this was the notable disappearance of carrion birds, nowhere to be seen in their usual or any other activity: the dogs, being domestic animals, allowed more immediate observation of this consequence.

51 This then, leaving aside the many variants in the way different individuals were affected, was the general character of the disease. Throughout this time there were no attacks of the usual illnesses: any that did occur ended in the plague.

Some died in neglect and others died despite constant care. Virtually no remedy was established as a single specific relief applicable in all cases: what was good for one was harmful to another. No particular constitution, strong or weak, proved sufficient in itself to resist, but the plague carried off all indiscriminately, and whatever their regime of care. The most dreadful aspects of the whole affliction were the despair into which people fell when they realized they had contracted the disease (they were immediately convinced that they had no hope, and so were much more inclined to surrender themselves without a fight), and the cross-infection of those who cared for others: they died like sheep, and this was the greatest cause of mortality. When people were afraid to visit one another, the victims died in isolation, and many households were wiped out through the lack of anyone to care for them. If they did visit the sick, they died, especially those who could claim some courage: these were people who out of a sense of duty disregarded their own safety and kept visiting their friends, even when ultimately the family members themselves were overwhelmed by the scale of the disaster and abandoned the succession of dirges for the dead. But the greatest pity for the dying and the distressed was shown by those who had had the disease and recovered. They had experience of what it was like and were now confident for themselves, as the plague did not attack the same person twice, or at least not fatally. These survivors were

congratulated by all, and in the immediate elation of recovery they entertained the fond hope that from now on they would not die of any other disease.

The suffering was made yet more acute by the influx from the country into the city, and the incomers suffered most of all. With no houses of their own, and forced to live in huts which at that time of year were stifling, they perished in chaotic conditions: the dead and the dying were piled on top of each other, and half-dead creatures staggered about the streets and round every fountain, craving for water. The sanctuaries in which they had encamped were full of corpses—people dying there were not moved: all sacred and secular constraints came to be ignored under the overwhelming impact of the disaster, which left men no recourse. All previously observed funeral customs were confounded, and burial was haphazard, any way that people could manage. Many were driven to shameful means of disposal for lack of friends to help them, so many of their friends already dead: they made use of other people's funeral pyres, either putting their own dead on a pyre constructed by others and quickly setting light to it, or bringing a corpse to a pyre already lit, throwing it on top of the other body in the flames, and then running away.

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 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 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.

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 will come, and bring a pestilence with it.' People had 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 was 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 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 was that the facts fitted the oracle. The plague had indeed begun immediately after the Peloponnesians had invaded, and it never reached the Peloponnesians to any significant extent, but spread particularly in Athens and later in other densely populated areas. So much for the facts of the plague.

55 Meanwhile the Peloponnesians, after ravaging the plain, moved on to the territory called the Coastal Region, penetrating as far as Laureium, the site of the Athenians' silver mines. They laid waste first the part of the territory facing the Peloponnesians, then the area lying in the direction of Euboea and Andros.

Pericles was still general, and held to the same view he had taken in the previous invasion, that the Athenians should not go out to offer battle. But while the Peloponnesians were still in the plain and before they had moved on to the coast, he was preparing an expedition of a hundred ships against the Peloponnesians, and when all was ready he took them out to sea. He had with him four thousand Athenian hoplites on board the ships, and three hundred cavalry in horse-transports, constructed then for the first time out of old ships: and Chios and Lesbos contributed to the expedition with fifty ships. When this Athenian force set sail, they had left the Peloponnesians in the coastal region of Attica. Arriving at Epidaurus in the Peloponnesians they ravaged most of the area, and in an attack on the city they came within hope of capturing it, but did not succeed. They then put out from Epidaurus and devastated the territory of Troezen, Halieis, and Hermione (all these are areas on the coast of the Peloponnesians). Moving on from there they came to Prasiae, a coastal town in Laconia: they ravaged some of the land and also took and