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Hist 100-50

430-429 Athenian Plague

“…and even though Thucydides provided detailed documentation on the symptoms of the plague that hit Athens in 430 BC, historians and pathologists alike have been stumped on what actually ended up wiping more than a third of the population out in a matter of months. Now, next class we will…”[[1]](#endnote-1)

That certainly broke me out of my stupor.

“Wait, what do you mean they haven’t been able to figure out what actually caused it?”

My eyes widened with shock and my face went beet red as I realized that my brain to mouth filter had failed me. The entire lecture hall froze in shock and went dead silent, all eyes now on me.

“Is there something I can help you with, Miss…?”

While I had never missed a class, I had never actually spoken in my three months in her class, so naturally she would have no idea who I was.

“Evitts ma’am. Taylor-Erin Evitts.”

“Well Miss. Evitts, was there something wrong with this particular lecture, seeing as you have never spoken up before?”

*“Oh crap, I am dead. I am so dead.”*

“If Thucydides gave such a detailed description on what occurred during the plague, how have we not discovered the disease that caused it, especially with the technology we have today?” I told her in a small voice.

“Well, perhaps you should try to figure that out for *yourself* Miss. Evitts.” she replied, with an excited spark in her eyes.

“*Great, more work for me.”* was my only thought as I walked back to my room to go to get ready for bed after class. Setting my alarm on my phone, I quickly got into bed and fell into a deep sleep.

After what felt like minutes, a strange noise woke me up. With blurry eyes, I started groping for my phone to make the ungodly noise stop, but for some reason, all the hand met was not my phone. Or even my bed for that matter. I finally cleared my eyes enough to see that I was laying on…straw? Yelping, I quickly rolled off the straw bed and onto to cold ground. “*What happened to my bed, heck, what happened to my room? Where am I?”* The quick thoughts racing through my head gave me a slight headache as I tried to comprehend what had happened.

“Girl! What are you doing still sleeping? Get up and ready, we have a busy day ahead!!” said a distinctly male voice near what I guessed to be the door.

As I looked up, I realized that the man could have been no older than 30…and was wearing a toga. Overgrown frat boy perhaps? Still having no idea where the heck I was, I decided to ask the man who is was and where I am.

“Who the heck are you? And where am I for that matter?”

“Dumb girl, did you hit your head last night? I am not even sure why I am letting one of the lesser species work with me. But alas, you are exceptionably bright in the field I am studying at the moment. I am Thucydides and you are in Athens, Greece of course!”

After that charming speach from the man… Thucydides apparently, the only words out of my brilliant mouth were “How are you speaking English?”

“What is this “English” you speak of, girl?” replied Thucydides with a puzzled expression on his face.

“…well apparently, I can speak Ancient Greek now, I wonder how that would look on my resume.” I mumble to myself unthinkingly.

“What is a “resume”? You know what, never mind that! We have much to do today and very little time. Now up, we must go!” he told me somewhat spastically and started towards the door of the tiny room I was currently in.

I quickly rushed to my feet and slipped on the thin sandals that were next to my pile of straw. The sandals were surprisingly comfortable for how thin that they seemed to be. My clothing, if it could even be called that, was a simple white cloth tied in an intricate fashion on the shoulder. While it was extremely comfortable, all I wanted at the moment was some jeans and a t-shirt. “*Oh well,”* I thought “*time to follow crazy guy and do…something.”*.

Walking outside I am immediately stopped dead in my tracks by the smell. Oh gosh the smell. The sickly-sweet smell of decaying flesh, burned my nose so badly that my eyes started watering and dry heaves wracked my body so hard that I had to sit down.

“What is wrong with you?” Thucydides demanded after turning around at the sound of my gagging.

“The smell. How do you stand it? Why is it so prominent?” I asked weakly after glancing up and getting back to my feet, now breathing through my mouth rather than my nose. Not that it was doing anything to prevent the smell.

“The smell? It has never bothered you before. The sickness that is running rampant through our city has terrified people. They fear going near the sickness stricken bodies of their loved ones for fear that they will catch it themselves. Officials have begun to shut and lock the houses of those taken by the sickness and have ignored the proper burial rights of those taken.” the man replied solemnly.[[2]](#endnote-2)

“Can we not do something to help them? I mean, where are the doctors? Why has a cure not been made yet?” I rapidly fired questions at him.

“That is what we are trying to do, figure out what this sickness is and what is spreading it so rapidly!” the man told me, seeming almost excited as he spoke.

*“I traveled back to the plague. I am in the middle of a plague that wiped out a third of Athens. Oh crap!”* My internal struggle was ignored by Thucydides as he started walking away from the small building that I woke up in.

We began walking through the city, all I could hear were the moans of those in pain, and the sobs of families mourning the loss of loved ones. All of a sudden we heard a high-pitched scream of a woman. I jumped in fright and Thucydides went sprinting in the direction of the scream. I quickly followed him weaving in and out of the crowd that had gathered around the building where the scream seemed to come from. What I saw and heard almost broke me.

“Let me back in! I need to help him! He’s my baby!” the woman screamed with tears streaming down her face whilst struggling against what seems to be her husbands tight hold.

The sharp wails of an infant came from inside the building. Each cry cutting through me, beckoning me to sooth the child. Thucydides looked at me with a maniac grin on his face, one that made me want to slap off his face.

“Time for work,” he said as he beckoned me to follow him inside the house, “just don’t touch the child.”

As we walked into the dark, candle lit room, the wails grew louder and louder. It took everything in me not to reach out and grab the screaming infant to sooth his pain.

“Why can’t I touch him? He is clearly in pain!” I whisper furiously at Thucydides.

“He has stage one of the sickness. We are here to observe and transcribe what is happening to him.” the man says solemnly to me whilst staring steadily at the infant. “Now, what do you observe? I value your opinion on this matter.” He asks me, whispering so low that I can barely hear him.

“Why are you whispering so lowly? We are the only people in here.” I asked confused.

“So the men outside cannot hear, stupid girl! They need not know that I am stooping so low as to ask a mere woman what her opinions are on this matter when I am trying to get what I am writing published!” he once again whispers furiously.

“Well okay, let me get closer to the child for I may tell you what I see.” I tell him barely holding my tongue on the sarcasm that wanted to angrily come out.

As I crept closer to the makeshift crib, the first thing I noticed was the bright red rash around the infant’s eyes. The rash, so inflamed and swollen, seemed to take over the tiny eyes of the baby, and make them seem bug-like. The small infant was seemingly clutching its head; which was odd for such a young child; indicating that he was perhaps having a splitting headache. When my eyes finally adjusted to the dim lighting, I almost screamed with my next finding. Blood was coming out of the infant’s mouth.[[3]](#endnote-3) I looked back at Thucydides horrified by what I saw but he did not seem surprised in the least; like he had seen it a hundred times before. All Thucydides did was turn around and start walking towards a desk that contained piles of parchment and pots of ink. Right as he approached the desk, the infant started choking, unable to breath because of the blood coming out of his mouth. Without thinking I ran forward, reaching for the choking child, picking him up to help clear his airway.

“No! You stupid, foolish girl! What have you done!” Thucydides screamed at me as cradled the still wailing infant.

“He was choking to death! I could not just stand right next to him and let that happen!” I screamed back at him.

“You could be infected now!” he yelled back at me, “Wait, this may work to our advantage.” He said in a much calmer voice but with an evil looking smirk on his face.

*“Oh crap”* was all that came to mind at the moment.

We made our way out of the house, me still holding the now calm infant. As we walked back outside, the crowd that was still gathered with the wailing mother just gasped and started pointing at me and running away. I suppose my holding someone infected with the sickness, even if it was an infant, did not make me very popular.

“Please! Please help him!” the infant’s mother wailed at me as we passed her.

“I will try.” I promised her.

Thucydides and I started walking back through the town, people were now hiding and peeking around corners at us. I still had no idea why everyone was acting this way.

“Thucydides, why is everyone acting so afraid?” I asked my companion.

“Because people kept contracting the sickness while caring for their loved one. Now whenever someone gets the sickness, most people leave them to die so they don’t get the sickness too.” He replies.

We finally reached the house while I was lost in my thoughts. By the time we reached it, it was somehow already dark. I got the infant ready for bed and put the sleeping child on a smaller pile of straw next to my bed. Thucydides seemed to just disappear but I wasn’t too worried. If I was being honest, I was happy to finally be rid of him for the time being.

The next morning I woke up to the child’s screams and a violent headache. I picked up the infant who proceeded to vomit all over me.[[4]](#endnote-4) “*Great,”* I thought “*I have vomit all over me and now I have one of the first symptoms of the plague.”.* A voice startled me out of my thoughts and started the baby wailing again.

“I am guessing you are showing signs of the sickness?” Thucydides quietly asked from his spot in the corner of the room.

I just looked at him. Not a glare or a sneer, simply looked at him. But I am sure that the hopelessness showed on my face. That the fear showed on my face. I screwed up. I contracted the sickness. Contracted the plague.

The next few days flew by and I felt like I was barely aware of anything. The infant that caused all of this did not last much longer after my symptoms started, simply because I was unable to care for him. Thucydides, however, never left my side, mostly because he was recording every single one of my symptoms one by one. We got into many fights about those.

*“Violent heats in the head.” Thucydides spoke out loud whilst writing on a worn piece of parchment.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

*“Why don’t you just say “headache”? It makes so much more sense.” I asked him looking at him like he was crazy.*

*“Headache is too boring sounding.” He said without looking at me.*

After the headache, the skin around my eyes started swelling and getting irritated, just like the child had. Then the blood. The blood was probably the worst part of it all. It would not stop coming from my throat and tongue. I am not sure if it was the blood, my breath became as foul as it could be. It was almost an unnatural odor. But that was only the first stage.[[6]](#endnote-6)

With the second stage, came even more pain. I felt as though my body was being burned alive from the inside out. However, Thucydides swore that I had no fever, nor was I pale or clammy. I kept coughing up more blood, barely being able to eat or sleep because of the coughing. I had never felt anything like it. Then came the vomiting, “discharges of bile” as Thucydides over complicated it in his paper. At one point, I seemed to black out, coming too, I realized that I had violently bit my tongue.[[7]](#endnote-7)

“Wha…what happened?” I barely was able to rasp out.

“You started violently spasming.”[[8]](#endnote-8) Thucydides told me, still scribbling furiously on that stupid piece of parchment.

I started losing track of time. Days ran into each other. When asked what day it was, Thucydides simply replied that I didn’t have much longer because most didn’t make it after the seventh or eighth day. The internal burning was getting worse. I felt as thought the inflammation was everywhere and would never cease. To distract me from my pain, I started asking Thucydides about the sickness. He started telling me what he was writing and his initial observations when the plague first broke out. He told me how the animals that would try to scavenge from the dead bodies, would either refrain from eating the flesh of those taken by the sickness or, if they did scavenge from the bodies, they would be found dead the next day, as if the flesh was a deadly poison. Birds that would usually flock towards the bodies, seemed to just disappear since the first outbreak of the sickness. People who somehow beat the sickness seemed to always lose at least one extremity, either being, fingers, toes, or eyes. Many survivors also ended up losing their entire memory, not knowing who they were or where they were. However, if one was able to beat the sickness, they seemed to be immune to getting the sickness again. [[9]](#endnote-9)

“Will it be over soon?” I pleaded with the still scribbling man in the corner, barely able to lift my head due to the extreme weakness I was experiencing.

“Soon, girl, soon. Not many last this long. But I have been able to get my paper written because of you getting this sickness.” He replied, both solemnly and excitedly.

“So, what is this sickness?” I asked, confused wondering if he had figured something out while I was struggling between overcoming the weakness and giving into it.

“No idea! Maybe its something from the West but no one has ever seen anything like it before.[[10]](#endnote-10)” he told me while studying his writing.

All I did was look at him. I felt that I had gone through everything for nothing. People were still going to die from this sickness because we haven’t been able to figure out a cure. I didn’t even know if I would be able to see my family again. I still had no idea how I even ended up in Ancient Athens. “*Now I know what people during this plague felt like, and how hopeless they must have felt when they realized that they contracted the sickness.”* and with that final thought and a final look into the sad eyes of Thucydides, I fell into a deep sleep.

I woke up with a loud gasp, “Bleeding Out” by Imagine Dragons playing loudly from my phone that was located next to my ear. I quickly turned the alarm off and just stared at the ceiling.

“What The Heck Was That?” I said to the room.

With no one to answer my question, I decided to get ready to face the woman whose answer to my initial question seemed to cause the weirdest dream of my life. Quickly getting dressed, I made my way to my professor’s office, almost sprinting across campus and up the flights of stairs. As I was rushing down the hall I noticed that her door was open and she seemed like she was waiting for me.

“So, Miss. Evitts, how was your research on the 430-429 Athenian plague?” she asked me with a slight smirk on her face.

1. D. L. Page "Thucydides' Description of the Great Plague at Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 3, no. 3/4 (1953): 97-119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/637025>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. A.J. Holladay., and J. C. F. Poole. "Thucydides and the Plague of Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1979): 282-300. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/638096> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. P. Salway, and W. Dell "Plague at Athens." *Greece & Rome* 2, no. 2 (1955): 62-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/641610>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. G. W. Bowersock "The Personality of Thucydides." *The Antioch Review* 25, no. 1 (1965): 135-46. doi:10.2307/4610668. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. D. L. Page "Thucydides' Description of the Great Plague at Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 3, no. 3/4 (1953): 97-119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/637025> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. A.J. Holladay., and J. C. F. Poole. "Thucydides and the Plague of Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1979): 282-300. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/638096> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. D. L. Page "Thucydides' Description of the Great Plague at Athens." *The Classical Quarterly* 3, no. 3/4 (1953): 97-119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/637025>. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. P. Salway, and W. Dell "Plague at Athens." *Greece & Rome* 2, no. 2 (1955): 62-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/641610> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)