

The return of the plague in Thucydides' account of the Athenian defeat at Sicily

Tobias Joho, University of Chicago
joho@uchicago.edu

(I) Parallels between excursus on plague and account of defeat at Sicily

(1) Spatial constriction

(a) Sicily:

- 7.87.1: ἐν ... κοίλῳ **χωρίῳ** ὄντας καὶ **ὀλίγῳ** πολλοὺς
“being, in large numbers, in a hollow and **small spot**”
- 7.87.2: πάντα τε ποιούντων αὐτῶν διὰ **στενοχωρίαν** ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ
“because of the **narrowness of space** they did everything in the same spot”

(b) plague

- 2.52.1: ἐπίεσε δ' αὐτοὺς ... ἡ **ξυγκομιδὴ** ἐκ τῶν ἀγρῶν ἐς τὸ ἄστυ, καὶ οὐχ ἦσσαν τοὺς ἐπελθόντας. οἰκιῶν γὰρ οὐχ ὑπαρχουσῶν ...
“and the **crowding** from the countryside into the city distressed them, especially the incomers. For houses were not provided in sufficient numbers ...”

(2) Heat

(a) Sicily:

- 7.87.1: οἱ τε ἥλιοι τὸ πρῶτον καὶ **τὸ πνίγος** ἔτι ἐλύπει
“at first the sun and, besides, **the stifling heat** distressed them”

(b) plague:

- 2.49.2: τῆς κεφαλῆς **θέρμαι** ἰσχυραί
“intense **heat** of the head [seized people]”
- 2.49.5: τὰ δὲ ἐντὸς οὕτως **ἐκάετο** ὥστε μήτε τῶν πάνυ λεπτῶν ἱματίων καὶ σινδόνων τὰς ἐπιβολὰς ... ἀνέχεσθαι ...
“but the inwards were **becoming** so **hot** that the patients could not bear to have the lightest coverings or linens on them”
- 2.49.6: διεφθείροντο οἱ πλεῖστοι ἐναταῖοι καὶ ἐβδομαῖοι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἐντὸς **καύματος**
“most people died on the seventh or ninth day from the inward **heat**”
- 2.52.2: ἐν καλύβαις **πνιγηραῖς** ὥρα ἔτους διαιτωμένων
“they were living in huts that were **stifling** because of the season of the year”

(3) Hunger and thirst

(a) Sicily:

- 7.87.2: καὶ λιμῶ ἅμα καὶ δίψῃ ἐπιέζοντο
“they were distressed by hunger and thirst”

(b) plague:

- 2.49.5: τῇ δίψῃ ἀπαύστῳ ξυνεχόμενοι
“being afflicted by unquenchable thirst”
- 2.54.2: ἥξει Δωριακὸς πόλεμος καὶ λοιμὸς [or λιμός; cf. 2.54.3] ἅμ’ αὐτῷ.
“A Dorian war will come and pestilence [or “hunger”] with it.”

(4) Piles of corpses

(a) Sicily:

- 7.87.2: τῶν νεκρῶν ὁμοῦ ἐπ’ ἀλλήλοις ξυννενημένων
“the corpses being piled up together on top of each other”

(b) plague:

- 2.52.2: νεκροὶ ἐπ’ ἀλλήλοις ἀποθνήσκοντες ἔκειντο
“corpses of dying people lay on top of each other”

(c) at Sicily again (cf. Connor 1984, 204n.51)

- 7.85.1: νεκρῶν ... πολλῶν ἐπ’ ἀλλήλοις ἤδη κειμένων
“many corpses already lying on top of each other”

(5) Collapse of hope

(a) Sicily

- 7.47.2: τὰ τε ἄλλα ὅτι ἀνέλπιστα αὐτοῖς ἐφαίνετο
“and all the other aspects of the situation seemed to them as hopeless as could be”
- 7.71.7: τοῖς Ἀθηναίοις ἀνέλπιστον ἦν τὸ κατὰ γῆν σωθήσεσθαι
“There was no hope for the Athenians to be saved on land”
- 8.1.2: ἀνέλπιστοι ἦσαν ... σωθήσεσθαι
“They [sc. the Athenians] were hopeless of being saved”

(b) plague

- 2.51.4: πρὸς γὰρ τὸ ἀνέλπιστον εὐθὺς τραπόμενοι τῇ γνώμῃ πολλῶ μᾶλλον προΐεντο σφᾶς αὐτοὺς καὶ οὐκ ἀντεῖχον
“For they immediately turned to hopelessness in their thinking and much rather gave themselves up and did not resist”

(6) Reversal

(a) μεταβολή at Sicily:

- 7.87.1: αἱ νύκτες ἐπιγιγνόμεναι τούναντίον μετοπωριναὶ καὶ ψυχραὶ τῇ μεταβολῇ ἐς ἀσθένειαν ἐνεωτέριζον
“The nights that followed were, contrariwise, autumnal and cold and brought about a shift towards sickness because of the change [in temperature].”
- 7.87.2: οἱ ἕκ τε τῶν τραυμάτων καὶ διὰ τὴν μεταβολὴν καὶ τὸ τοιοῦτον ἀπέθνησκον
“Those who were dying from wounds or because of the change [in temperature] or some other reason of this kind.”

(b) μεταβολή in plague narrative:

- 2.53.1: ἀγχίστροφον τὴν μεταβολὴν ὁρῶντες τῶν τε εὐδαιμόνων καὶ αἰφνιδίως θνησκόντων καὶ τῶν οὐδὲν πρότερον κεκτημένων, εὐθὺς δὲ τὰ κείνων ἐχόντων
“seeing that the reversal was sudden both of those who were prosperous and suddenly died and of those who previously possessed nothing but suddenly were in possession of the belongings of others”
- 2.61.2 (Pericles): μεταβολῆς μεγάλης, καὶ ταύτης ἐξ ὀλίγου, ἐμπεσοῦσης
“a great reversal, and an unexpected one at that, has befallen us”

(c) παράλογος in plague narrative:

- 2.61.3 (Pericles): τὸ πλείστῳ παραλόγῳ ξυμβαῖνον
“an occurrence that happened utterly against calculation”

(d) παράλογος at Sicily

- 7.55.1: ὁ παράλογος αὐτοῖς μέγας ἦν
“the miscalculation, which had happened to them, was great”

(II) The return of the plague and the striving after τὰ ἀπόντα and τὰ ἀφανῆ(7) The Athenian fascination with Sicily's "absence" and "invisibility"(a) 6.13.1 (Nicias): δυσέρωτας εἶναι τῶν ἀπόντων"to be sickly in love with absent things"(b) 6.9.3 (Nicias): τοῖς ἐτοιμοῖς περὶ τῶν ἀφανῶν καὶ μελλόντων κινδυνεύειν"to put what is available at risk for invisible and future things"(c) 6.24.3: τῆς τε ἀπουσίας πόθῳ ὄψεως καὶ θεωρίας"out of a longing for absent sights and spectacles"(8) "Absence" and "invisibility" signifying death

(a) ἀφανίζω meaning "to kill"

- 4.80.4: οἱ δὲ οὐ πολλῶ ὕστερον ἠφάνισάν τε αὐτοὺς καὶ οὐδεὶς ἤσθετο ὅτῳ τρόπῳ ἕκαστος διεφθάρη ("But, not much later, they [sc. the Spartans] did away with them [sc. the most spirited helots], and no one knew in what way each of them had perished.")
- 8.38.1: Μετὰ δὲ ταύτας τὰς ξυνθήκας Θηριμένης μὲν παραδοὺς Ἀστυόχῳ τὰς ναῦς ἀποπλέων ἐν κέλητι ἀφανίζεται ("But after the conclusion of this treaty, Therimenes handed over the fleet to Astyochus, and sailing off in a skiff he was never seen again.")

(b) ἀπογίγνομαι meaning "to die"

- 2.51.5: τὰς ὀλοφύρσεις τῶν ἀπογιγνομένων τελευτῶντες καὶ οἱ οἰκεῖοι ἐξέκαμνον ("even the relatives of those who were dying at last were growing weary of mourning")

(9) Language of invisibility in Book 7(a) 7.75.4: μείζω ἢ κατὰ δάκρυα τὰ μὲν πεπονθότας ἤδη, τὰ δὲ περὶ τῶν ἐν ἀφανεῖ δεδιότας μὴ πάθωσιν"having already suffered hardships too great for tears, and fearing with regard to the things that lie in the invisible realm that they may still suffer others"

- what are τὰ ἐν ἀφανεῖ?
 - "things that lie in the future"
 - "things that lie in the underworld" (= τὰ ἐν Ἄιδου)

(b) 7.69.2: τὰς πατρικὰς ἀρετὰς, ὧν ἐπιφανεῖς ἦσαν οἱ πρόγονοι, μὴ **ἀφανίζειν**

“[sc. Nicias urged] those whose forefathers were conspicuous not to **efface** their fathers’ deeds of valor”

(10) Athens empty of its people

(a) After the Sicilian defeat:

- 8.1.2: στερόμενοι καὶ ἰδίᾳ ἕκαστος καὶ ἡ πόλις ὀπλιτῶν τε πολλῶν καὶ ἰππέων καὶ ἡλικίας οἷαν οὐχ ἑτέραν ἐώρων ὑπάρχουσαν
“Both each person individually and the city were lacking many hoplites and horsemen and the flower of youth, and they did not see another of its kind left for them”
- 8.1.2: ναῦς οὐχ ὀρῶντες ἐν τοῖς νεωσοίκοις ἱκανὰς οὐδὲ χρήματα ἐν τῷ κοινῷ οὐδ’ ὑπηρεσίας ταῖς ναυσὶν
“They did not see ships in sufficient numbers in the docks or money in the treasury or crews for the ships”

(b) At the time of the plague:

- 2.51.3: πάντα **ἔσυνήρει** (“[sc. the plague] **carried off** everything”)
- 2.51.5: ἀπώλλυντο **ἐρήμοι** (“people perished **in solitude**”)
- 2.51.5: οἰκίαι πολλαὶ **ἐκενώθησαν** (“many houses became **empty**”)

Secondary literature

Connor, W. Robert. 1984. *Thucydides*. Princeton.

Hornblower, Simon. 1991. *A Commentary on Thucydides. Volume I: Books I – III*. Oxford.

Frisk, H. 1960-70. *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch: Band I-II*. Heidelberg.

Kallet, Lisa. 2001. *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides. The Sicilian Expedition and its Aftermath*. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London.

Parry, Adam. 1969. “The Language of Thucydides’ Description of the Plague.” In: *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies London* 16.

Rawlings, Hunter R. III. 1981. *The Structure of Thucydides’ History*. Princeton.

Swain, Simon. 1994. “Man and Medicine in Thucydides.” In: *Arethusa* 27.

Wohl, Victoria. 2002. *Love among the Ruins. The Erotics of Democracy in Classical Athens*. Princeton and Oxford.