

The Return of the Plague in Thucydides' Account of the Athenian Defeat at Sicily

This paper will attempt to show that Thucydides' account of the final stages of the disaster experienced by the Athenians on Sicily recalls the description of the plague at Athens. Previous scholarship has noticed traces of this phenomenon in passing (Rawlings 1981: 157; Connor 1984: 204n.51; Wohl 2002: 198), but its full scope and significance have not been recognized. The flaring up of conditions resembling the plague reveals a hidden danger that was from the very beginning bound up in the Athenians' desire to conquer Sicily. The Athenians are above all fascinated by two attributes of Sicily: its "absence" and "invisibility" (6.9.3, 13.1, 24.3). Overtly these terms refer to the intriguing foreignness of Sicily. Yet the parallelism with the plague uncovers a further sense of these terms: "absence" and "invisibility" do not merely suggest the lure of the unknown, but also death and destruction.

In Thucydides' description of the wretched conditions under which the surviving Athenians are imprisoned in the Syracusan stone quarries, almost every detail recalls the plague at Athens: people are wedged in a narrow space (2.52.1 ~ 7.87.1, 87.2); oppressive heat is emphasized (2.49.2, 49.5, 49.6, 52 ~ 7.87.1); unpleasant smell is mentioned (2.49.2 ~ 7.87.2); thirst and hunger play a role (2.49.5, 54.2 ~ 7.87.2); and on both occasions people die in disorder and corpses are heaped upon each other (2.52.2 ~ 7.87.2). Moreover, both the plague and the defeat in Sicily, by leading to a collapse of hope (2.51.4 ~ 7.71.7, 8.1.2), erode the Athenians' exceptional ability to be "hopeful amidst terrors" (1.70.3). Finally both events happen "contrary to expectation," *παρὰ λόγον* (2.61.3; 7.55.1). Such utter unexpectedness is, according to Stahl (2003: 67, 142), indicative of the structure of a *μεταβολή*, i.e. the momentous reversal of a situation. Precisely this term is used of the shift of assumptions brought about both by the plague (2.48.3, 53.1, 61.2) and by the defeat at Sicily (7.76.1). The word also appears in the account of the imprisoned Athenians, where it refers to the drastic shifts in temperature (7.87.1, 2). The systematic echoes suggest that the defeat at Sicily signifies a resurgence of the conditions that prevailed during the plague.

The similarities with the plague ultimately point to an oblique meaning of the Athenians' desire for "invisible" and "absent things," which is the driving force behind the expedition. On the surface, τὰ ἀφανῆ (6.9.3) and τὰ ἀπόντα (6.13.1, 24.3) simply refer to the alluring unfamiliarity of Sicily. Yet at the end of the expedition, when conditions prevail that recall the plague, an ironic meaning of these terms is exposed. Thucydides repeatedly characterizes the death that the plague brings by using language that signifies removal and disappearance: the plague "carries off everything" (2.51.3: πάντα ξυνήρει; 2.51.3), it exposes the insubstantial transitoriness of the human body (2.53.2: ἐφήμερα τά ... σώματα), and it causes many houses to become "empty" (ibid.: ἐκενώθησαν). Most importantly, patients who are about to die are called "those who become absent" (2.51.5: τῶν ἀπογιγνομένων). Since the past forms of γίγνομαι frequently have the same meaning as those of εἰμί, the verbs ἀπογίγνομαι ("become absent") and ἄπειμι ("be absent") are semantically very close to each other. The enumerated effects of the plague can be summed up by the idea that human bodies become "absent" and "invisible." Indeed the verb ἀφανίζω ("make invisible, cause to disappear"), which is etymologically derived from ἀφανές, can be used as a euphemistic expression for killing (4.80.4; 8.38.1). It refers especially to death under mysterious circumstances. Such obscurity is characteristic of the plague, whose origins are likewise deeply mysterious (2.47.3, 50.1).

When circumstances have come to pass that resemble the plague, the Athenians have indeed achieved their goal of attaining "absent" and "invisible" objects, but in a different sense than they had intended: by trying to conquer Syracuse, they have attained "invisibility" not in the sense of conquering an unfamiliar territory, but in the sense of bringing about their own annihilation. The sinister undertones of τὰ ἀφανῆ should have warned them. The Athenians are victims of a tragic irony: they should have realized from the outset that their desire for "absent" and "invisible things" would eventually lead them towards their own destruction.

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