

The Politics of Contagious Disease: From Homer's Plague to COVID-19

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 shook the global community and quickly brought into sharp relief the intimate connection between public health and politics. From the onset of the disease politics has shaped not only the way medical professionals and agencies reacted but also the way knowledge about it circulated. From China's efforts to suppress information regarding the disease's severity to many countries' pre-emptive closing of borders and restrictions on travel, to the heated debates about lockdowns and mask-wearing, and the questioning of scientific expertise to serve political ends, we have witnessed firsthand the deep ties between politics and contagious disease.

In this panel, we would like to turn to ancient Greek and Roman narratives of contagious disease and explore the various ways in which they can illuminate this connection by comparison, similarity and contrast. Contagious disease in antiquity is entangled with literary representation and the literary, ideological, and political ramifications explored therein. In this panel we propose to both understand the link between the literary, historical and the political and to seek connections or differences that will enrich our understanding of contemporary reactions (political, social, scientific) to the current pandemic.

The papers that constitute the panel all look at this connection, each with a different focus or point of view, from literary analysis and ancient political theory to biopolitics. A respondent will draw these threads together and provide the starting point for a fruitful discussion.

Paper 1 looks at the different representations of the pestilence at Dyrrachium in the works of Lucan and Caesar. The connection between disease and civil war is made explicit in Lucan, while Caesar actually manipulates the narrative so as not to follow that trope of civil war by

showing his soldiers as healthy and Pompey's as sick. The physical pestilence becomes a vehicle for the articulation of competing interpretations, interweaving the physical with the political in an attempt to control the narrative for posterity. As Caesar seeks to divorce his narrative from the trope of the sickened body politic, Lucan uses precisely this element of his narrative in order to firmly return it to that trope.

Paper 2 analyzes the pestilential narratives of *Aeneid* 3 and traces a pattern of pestilence-displacement-foundation that links public health to Aeneas' abilities as a leader. The paper argues that the various pestilences that occur in the book, either literal or metaphorical, are accompanied by leadership decisions that come first from the group, then from Anchises, and eventually Aeneas himself. Aeneas' leadership is thus linked with his ability to guarantee the health and bodily integrity of his community, offering a leadership model that is at once empathetic and resilient.

Paper 3 examines the role of Thucydides' plague narrative in our understanding of the central aims of his history. For Thucydides, the plague narrative aims to make the reader discern the underlying causes of events and to draw analogies with the present. Examined alongside the stasis in Corcyra and Pericles' Funeral oration, the plague narrative highlights the psychological impact on a variety of levels: personal, social, and political. Thucydides' narrative can thus model an approach to contemporary disasters such as that of COVID-19 with a similar attention to the complexity of social and political issues that shape people's reaction and response.

Paper 4 focuses on the concept of security and examines the earlier narratives of plague in Homer, Sophocles and Thucydides as "ground zero of security." The paper argues that its main goal is the preservation of life but that the question also affects the debate over governing priorities, such as social order, laws, material possessions, etc. As a result, practices that establish

security become fully intertwined with political and social protocols and hierarchies. Narratives of the plague initially appear to suggest that security is achieved through exclusion but eventually move to a new model of inclusion of the disease normalizing the crisis. The paper concludes that tenets of modern biopolitical thought can be traced back to Greek narratives.

Paper 5 continues to use the lens of biopolitics to examine the problem of contagion, but shifts the focus to the political implications of its treatment in the genre of *Problemata physica* and analyzes the political implications of the treatment of contagion in these texts. More specifically, the paper argues that an examination of Pseudo-Aristotle, Pseudo-Alexander, and Galen provides a locus for an articulation of ancient biopolitics. Accordingly, by including discussions on the transmission of contagious disease, this group of texts dealing with human nature grapples both with the idea of contagion as affecting all human bodies and with the inherently political aspects of contagious disease.