

## Plague of Athens 430 BC Wikipedia 28Mar2006

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In the second year of the [Peloponnesian War \(430 BC\)](#), when an Athenian victory still seemed within reach, the city of [Athens](#) was hit by a devastating [epidemic](#), known as the **Plague of Athens**.

Because the [Spartans](#) had a much greater army, the Athenians were forced to retreat behind the city walls of Athens. From there, they hoped to keep the Spartans at bay, allowing the Athenian navy to cut off supply lines and thereby win through attrition.

The historian [Thucydides](#) described the coming of an epidemic disease which began in [Ethiopia](#), passed through [Egypt](#) and [Libya](#), and then came to the Greek world. The epidemic broke out in the city, which was tightly packed with people. Athens lost perhaps one third of its populace. The sight of the burning funeral pyres of Athens caused the Spartan army to withdraw for fear of catching the disease and bringing it back to Sparta. It killed many of Athens's infantry, some expert seamen and their leader, [Pericles](#). After the death of Pericles Athens was led by a succession of incompetent or weak leaders. According to Thucydides it was not until 415 BC that the Athenian population had recovered sufficiently to mount the disastrous [Sicilian Expedition](#).

Modern historians disagree on whether the plague was a critical factor in the loss of the war. However, the loss of the war may have paved the way for the success of the [Macedonians](#) and, ultimately, the [Romans](#).

The Athenian plague is a graphic description of the consequences of an epidemic to a society. Thucydides' account clearly details the complete disappearance of social mores during the time of the plague. According to his account, people ceased fearing the law since they felt they were already living under a death sentence. Likewise people started spending money indiscriminately. Many felt they would not live long enough to enjoy the fruits of wise investment while many of the poor had become wealthy from inheriting the property of their relatives. It is also recorded that people refused to behave honourably because most did not expect to live long enough to enjoy a good reputation for it. The plague even changed the role of women in Athenian society. The women were temporarily liberated from the strict bounds of Athenian custom. The plague forced Athens to appoint a magistrate called gynaikonomos to control the behaviour of women.

Another reason for the lack of honourable behaviour was the sheer contagiousness of the illness. Those who tended to the ill were most vulnerable to catching the disease. This meant that many people died alone because no one was willing to risk caring for them. Especially poignant are the descriptions of how the dead were not tended to due to the overwhelming numbers of sick and dying. People were simply left to die in the streets and the dead were simply heaped on top of each other and left to rot or be placed in mass

graves. There were cases where those coming across an already burning funeral pyre would dump their body on it and then leave, while others stole wood so as to have enough to cremate their dead. Those lucky enough to survive the plague developed an immunity and became the main carers for the sick.

The plague also caused great religious strife. Since the disease struck the virtuous and sinful alike people felt abandoned by the gods and refused to worship them. The temples themselves were sites of great misery. The refugees from the Athenian countryside had been forced to find accommodation in temples and soon the temples were filled with the dead and dying. The Athenians pointed to the plague as evidence that the gods had favoured Sparta and this was backed up by an oracle that said that Apollo himself would fight for Sparta if they fought with all their might. Another earlier oracle had stated that "War with the Dorians [Spartans] comes and at the same time death". Thucydides himself was skeptical of this and believed that people were simply being superstitious.

Thucydides himself suffered the illness and was therefore able to describe the symptoms of the plague very accurately. The first symptoms were a burning headache and inflamed eyes. Soon this progressed to bleeding from the mouth. Sneezing and hoarseness of the voice soon followed. The victims were soon wracked by severe coughing and chest pain. The pain eventually settled in the stomach and caused very severe vomiting. Most victims suffered from dry retching which led to painful spasms throughout the course of the disease. The skin of the victims was pale and covered in ulcers and welts. The patients at this stage were not febrile but felt as though they were extremely hot and could not bear the lightest touch and would prefer to be naked. Many of the patients would jump into wells to escape the burning heat. Patients were also afflicted with insomnia and restlessness. Most people died on the seventh or eighth days. Those who did not suffered terrible diarrhoea and would often die from dehydration.

Historians have long tried to identify the disease behind the 'plague' of Athens. More than one disease could have been involved in the outbreak, due to crowding caused by the influx of refugees into the city. The primary disease has traditionally been considered an outbreak of [bubonic plague](#), but re-considerations of the reported symptoms and epidemiology have led scholars to advance alternative explanations including [typhus](#), [smallpox](#), [measles](#), and [toxic shock syndrome](#). Others have suggested [anthrax](#), tramped up from the soil by the thousands of stressed refugees or concentrated livestock. Based upon descriptive comparisons with recent outbreaks in Africa, [ebola](#) has also been considered.

A new DNA study of plague victims suggests that [typhoid](#) was responsible for the epidemic.<sup>[1]</sup>

Other scientists dispute this, citing serious methodologic flaws in the dental pulp-derived DNA study.