

# The ancient Greeks also lived through a plague, and they too blamed their leaders for their suffering

March 8 2022, by Joel Christensen

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as [a scholar of ancient Greek literature](#), I have returned again and again to the Greek historian

Thucydides to try understand the historical parallels to the American response to the health crisis.

Thucydides—a onetime general and historian of the Peloponnesian War, a generation-long struggle between Athens and Sparta—presents one of the most famous accounts of a plague from antiquity.

Then, as now, the story forms the backdrop for tragedy and conflict as Thucydides focuses on the emotional impact of living through a plague.

## Parallels with plague

At the beginning of its conflict with its historical adversary, Sparta, Athens pulled its people and forces within [the long walls](#) that protected the central city's access to the sea. With Athens' maritime and economic supremacy, its leader Pericles believed that with such a strategy, the city-state would be impossible to conquer.

An unintended consequence of this strategy, however, was that the crowded confines of the city made it a fertile ground for a novel pathogen. The emergence of plague led to a temporary suspension of Athenian life, but it did not change the policy on the war or its strategy, despite the death toll.

Thucydides' account [records vividly](#) the onset and progress of the disease as it fell on Athens. Some of what he wrote might sound familiar today: The [symptoms of what was then an unidentified disease](#) included chest pain, a cough, fever and diarrhea; if the disease was not fatal, it often left scars and a loss of memory.

Just as the spread of COVID-19 across the world led to a heightened focus on its origins, Thucydides tracked how the plague [allegedly moved](#) from [Egypt through the Persian Empire and into Greece](#).

Thucydides also noted another fallout—despair. He described despair as the "[most terrible feature of the sickness](#)" and recorded that depression and fear were common. Like today, families lost their loved ones to the disease, and any kind of social order dissipated.

## The despair of disease

I have also been deeply affected by Thucydides' ability to talk about the plague from his own experience. As he notes at the beginning of his narrative of the disease, he [became sick himself](#) and watched others suffer.

Few people I know made it through 2020 and 2021 without anxiety about their own or their loved ones' health. But the despair of actually contracting the disease and the feeling of utter powerlessness of watching one's family getting it as well was something I personally evaded until January 2022.

Even though my spouse, my two [older children](#) and I were all vaccinated, we all contracted the virus. Our "mild" COVID experience left me winded going up stairs for weeks. And over a month later there is no one who can say what the long-term effects will be for us or our children.

Thucydides describes not just the despair of getting sick but the danger faced in "caring for one another." My wife and I considered ourselves lucky that our fevers peaked at different times, leaving one of us to comfort our 9-month-old through four days of fever and a worrisome cough.

While we were sick, an average of [3,000 people died a day](#) in the United States. Local and federal officials in many areas have pushed for a return to normal by planning to [drop mask mandates](#) and [other restrictions](#). [Experts have cautioned](#) about the risk of new variants emerging as a

large number of people in low-income countries [remain unvaccinated](#).

## Plague and leadership

The stories we tell and don't tell about COVID-19 follow a pattern familiar to those who have spent time with ancient literature. Greek plague narratives take little interest in the nameless suffering masses and instead focus on the leaders who allow it to happen.

In Homer's "Iliad," the Greeks suffer a plague because their leader Agamemnon refuses the divinely sanctioned custom of accepting a ransom in exchange for a prisoner; the plague is sent as a [punishment](#). Sophocles' famous tragedy puts an Oedipus on stage. He wants to save his people [but can't see that he is the main cause](#) for the spread of the disease.

Faulty public policies in the [U.S.](#), the [U.K.](#), [Brazil](#) and elsewhere have [led to a large number of deaths](#) that many experts considered preventable. The virus is only the beginning of the problem.

Plague stories provide settings in which fate pushes human organization to the limit. Leaders almost always play a pivotal role, as Zeus observes in [Homer's "Odyssey,"](#) saying, "Humans are always blaming the gods for their suffering / but they experience pain beyond their fate because of their own recklessness."

## Leading for the public good

The Athenians lost the war with Sparta not because of the plague, but the [plague](#) did reveal the fault lines beneath the surface of Athenian culture. As Katherine Kelaidis, a scholar at the National Hellenic Museum, frames it, the disease was a [moral test of the physical and political](#)

## [structures of Athens.](#)

The Athenians lost tens of thousands of their citizens and soldiers and uncounted numbers of enslaved peoples and resident aliens, but they continued to fight for another 20 years. In the end, political factions and civil strife undermined their efforts to defend their state.

COVID-19 has shown the deep divisions among Americans, the lack of concern many of our neighbors show for one another, the fragility of the public health system and the limits of the leadership to meet collective challenges. But it has also shown the [remarkable speed and creativity of scientists](#) and [the benefits of collaboration across international boundaries](#) in helping us meet the unexpected.

Ancient Greek history and literature can help us understand the long-term social impacts of disease. They also show how fractious politics can undermine even heroic responses to public health challenges.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: The ancient Greeks also lived through a plague, and they too blamed their leaders for their suffering (2022, March 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-ancient-greeks-plague-blamed-leaders.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--