

Pandemics Then and Now: From Classical Greece and Rome to Today

Students in Davide Salvo's classics courses *Greece: Society & Culture* and *Roman History* courses compared the COVID-19 emergency with outbreaks of diseases in the ancient world in order to understand the relevance of the past with the present and explore how history repeats itself. Among the readings were Thucydides' account of the plague that ravaged Athens in the years 430-426 BCE (in CLS 205) and Procopius' description of the Justinian plague that devastated Constantinople in 541-542 CE (in CLS 104). In one class, students discussed the passage of Thucydides which describes the social response of ancient Athenians to the plague and compared it to our response to COVID-19. The students noticed similarities in how the outbreaks impact human relations and the economy. In the Roman History class, students analyzed the passage of Procopius and how this Byzantine historian describes the social response of the inhabitants of Constantinople to the plague and the impact of it on healthcare workers and the economy, and students noted similarities between the social response at the time of Justinian and today as they relate to healthcare workers, social relations, and customs.

Some of their answers comparing the Greek response to plague in *Greece: Society & Culture* are below:

People fell into despair when they found out they had it, similar to how many people are acting with COVID-19. People were isolated, with absolutely no visitors, which is exactly true today In Athens, people became lawless and dishonorable. I think some people have acted dishonorably, like the man hoarding hand sanitizer, but generally law and order has been maintained... I think Thucydides' account can be read as a warning, not so much a suggestion of how to act.

During the plague you begin to see a decrease in lawlessness meaning people have begun to just get the supplies that they need without a care of the law. You see a similar correlation to the COVID-19 epidemic mass purchasing supplies without a care for other people's needs. We also see the connection between the Plague and Covid-19 that neither discriminate by social class or any other social structure issue.

One of the similarities I see with the social response to COVID-19 is Thucydides describes the plague as indiscriminating. This is similar to COVID-19 because this virus does not discriminate either.

Similarities with the social response to the current COVID-19 epidemics like during the Athenian plague, COVID spreads through cross-infection, Athenians began distancing themselves from the sick, similar to today's social distancing, although it did not seem like that was Athenian public policy. The Athenian plague cause economic hardships, mostly from so many deaths, rather than the policy of shutting down businesses. Many people in Athens died alone in isolation and there are accounts of that happening to people today. When the Athenian plague began, it was first blamed on foreigners (the Peloponnesians) just as today many are blaming the Chinese. What we can learn from the account of Thucydides is that even after thousands of years, many things haven't changed. People are still vulnerable to diseases for which there is no cure. The best defense against contagious diseases is social distancing. People will still try to blame others, especial those they see as foreigners, for their misfortunes.

People fell into despair when they found out they had the disease. Cross-infection by those who cared for others. People afraid to visit one another. Increased lawlessness was also present. Some of this is similar to COVID-19. People today are avoiding others, staying inside, fighting over resources (groceries), and despair when they find out they have the disease. Thucydides' account shows how unruly people get when epidemics occur and the importance of managing it.

Some of the responses comparing the Justinian plague to today in *Roman History* are below:

These exact social responses (of the Byzantines) are happening today, albeit at a different rate in certain states compared to others. We are practicing social distancing, experiencing a meat shortage, a drop in the workforce... The economy did suffer as a result of people staying inside, but it undoubtedly saved lives. There is a similar debate raging in the United States currently, and it weighs the cost of human lives versus saving the economy. Clearly, the plague would have been much worse if the citizens of Constantinople didn't stay inside, and that should be a warning to us all.

The response to the plague was the same measure taken today with COVID-19: isolation. Although at the time this was not instructed by government officials like ours, the pandemic scared enough people to go into hiding within their homes. The economy of Constantinople, like the United States, started to decline dramatically. What we can learn from this previous plague is that for one thing: it will eventually come to an end. Another thing is to avoid contact with others to contain the spreading of the disease.

There are similarities in the two pandemic responses, as the emperor gave out funds to the people during that time. Our Government is also sending out a stimulus check to those who need it the most... Like New York State, the economy of Constantinople also suffered as no one was buying anything and no one was leaving their homes.

Though symptoms are different from COVID-19, the infectious nature means they both spread to a large number of people. People started staying in their houses, quarantine, and not talking to their neighbors. Work basically stopped, just like now, many aren't working which negatively affected the economy. Just like now, people can't go out without some risk of infection. Procopius blames the plague on God or some divine origin. He thinks those who are looking for a natural explanation are foolish in their search and can't convince others of that idea. We now know how disease spread and yet people are still not believing scientists. I think we can learn to take seriously what scientists and medical professionals are saying to try and slow down the spread of the disease.

(In Constantinople) The doctors did not know anything about the treatment of this disease. Those who were caregivers to the sick risked infection, as they were in constant contact with the sick. The caregivers to the sick and those who buried the dead oftentimes became infected themselves. The COVID-19 epidemic is similar in that there is limited knowledge on the virus, yet doctors are dedicated to treating infected patients despite risks of infection. Healthcare workers are forced to

put themselves at risk of infection to do their job...This account of a historical pandemic shows us that all mankind is equal from the perspective of a plague or virus, and people must come together to get through the situation.

(In Constantinople) The doctors of the time were not prepared for this plague and oftentimes they and other caregivers were affected by the plague. This is very similar to the current covid-19 situation because a lot of people affected are the caregivers.....At the end of the day though what we can learn from the Justinian Plague is that no matter how bad a plague is or can be if people just wait it out eventually things will get better and return back to some sort of normalcy.

I see similarities with the current situation going on, especially the social distancing that was practiced during the plague. Also, the fear people had is quite similar to what is going on now. Even though we supposedly live in a highly advanced society, we are still susceptible to diseases. I realize that I have taken many things for granted, especially about how important my faith is.