PLAGUE AND THE ATHENIAN IMAGINATION

The great plague of Athens that began in 430 BCE had an enormous effect on the imagination of its literary artists and on the social imagination of the city as a whole. In this book, Professor Mitchell-Boyask studies the impact of the plague on Athenian tragedy early in the 420s and argues for a significant relationship between drama and the development of the cult of the healing god Asclepius in the next decade, during a period of war and increasing civic strife. The Athenians' decision to locate their temple for Asclepius adjacent to the Theater of Dionysus arose from deeper associations between drama, healing and the polis that were engaged actively by the crisis of the plague. The book also considers the representation of the plague in Thucydides' *History* as well as the metaphors generated by that representation which recur later in the same work.

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Drama, history and the cult of Asclepius

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for Don Fowler

multa gemens, casuque animum concussus amici

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Preface

The final version of this book project has been thirteen years in the making. It has spanned births, deaths, theater productions, an extended department chairmanship, and sundry other obstacles. Indeed, so long has the completion of this book been delayed that some of the people whom I will subsequently thank here might not remember ever having discussed its ideas with me!

I am first and foremost indebted to the two institutions where this project began and ended: the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, DC and the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge University. My work on the meaning of the Athenian Asklepieion commenced during a term in 1993–94 as a Junior Fellow at the Center when I thought I was writing a book on Euripides. I am extremely grateful to the Center's directors at that time, Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub, not just for extending a fellowship to me at a critical moment, but also for fostering such a truly collegial and friendly environment, and to the other Junior Fellows for their incredible range of knowledge and their lively conversation, especially Eric Csapo, Ahuvia Kahane and Dirk Obbink. At another critical moment in 2005, Pat Easterling and Robin Osborne helped me secure a Visiting Fellowship at Wolfson College, Cambridge, and made me feel welcome as a Visiting Scholar in the Faculty of Classics at the University. It was during a visit to Cambridge early in 2004 when I realized that I had, actually, been writing a book about the great plague of Athens. I hope that the completion of this book is some form of adequate thanks for the help of my colleagues at the CHS and Cambridge. At Cambridge I enjoyed in particular also the intellectual companionship of Tim Duff, Elaine Fantham, William Fitzgerald, Simon Goldhill, Emily Gowers, Richard Hunter, Liz Irwin and Julia Shear. Aside from the intellectual community of classicists at both institutions, my work particularly benefited from their magnificent libraries which each keeps their stacks open and with all aspects of the study of Classics together in one large room. To a scholar whose work has always

been interdisciplinary, the time saved in not running to different floors, if not to different buildings, in order to fetch books from the range of disciplines that compose Classics is almost incalculable.

Early versions of my work on Euripidean drama and the Asklepieion were given in 1994 as talks at the Center for Hellenic Studies, at Harvard University, and at Jesus College, Oxford, at the invitation of Don Fowler. More on Don later. I also presented my ideas on Euripides' *Heracles* to the fall 1994 meeting of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States in Philadelphia, and on the *Phoenissae* to the spring 1995 CAAS at Rutgers University. In more recent years I tested versions of my chapter on the *Philoctetes* at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of the United Kingdom, held at the University of Warwick, the 2004 Annual Meeting of the APA in New Orleans, the University of Pennsylvania, and Cambridge. The chapter on the *Trachiniae* was presented at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the Classical Association of the United Kingdom, which was held at the University of Reading, at Stanford University and the University of Edinburgh. The friendly classicists at Swarthmore College hosted a version of the *Oedipus* chapter in 2006. From these performances and other conversations, I am grateful to have had the responses of Douglas Cairns, David Konstan, Albert Henrichs, Ian Rutherford, Oliver Taplin, Richard Seaford, Mark Padilla, Andromache Karanika, Sheila B. Murnaghan, Ralph Rosen, C. W. Marshall, Mike Lipman, Tom Harrison, Nick Lowe, Richard Martin, Lowell Edmunds, Peter Burian and Kirk Ormand. I would be extremely remiss not to single out for special thanks Michael Sharp of Cambridge University Press and the two anonymous readers, who all made valuable contributions to the final form of this book.

A shorter version of my chapter on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* appears in *TAPA* 137 (2007).

In the final stages of this work I acknowledge the support of Temple University, for a Research Leave in spring 2005 and a grant for summer 2006, and the Loeb Foundation for further support in the summer of 2006.

Through all stages of this project I have been blessed with the support of my wife, Amanda, and my children have kindly allowed its completion to interfere with their normal time with me!

Back to Don Fowler. In 1992 I received a letter from Don, shortly after the publication of my first article on the *Aeneid*, indicating a desire for conversation since we had similar interests. He included his e-mail address. Those were the early, heady days of the internet, so he had no idea whether I might be one of the first adopters as well. I was. His became one of

the friendships I have treasured most in this profession. Don's generosity, both personal and intellectual, has never ceased to inspire me, and many others, and I hope to carry it with me for the rest of my life. Don's own life ended prematurely in 1999. Others have written about that loss far more eloquently than I could. I thus simply dedicate this book to his memory. I wish he could have read it.

Last in this beginning, I acknowledge that parts of this work are speculative and conjectural and I ask my readers to approach them with an open mind. Readers who prefer concrete, unassailable proof for all arguments will not be happy here, but I believe that, if they are patient, they might still find benefits to my approach.

Prologue

Our knowledge of late fifth-century Athens in general and of the plague of 430–426 BCE in particular has largely, and at times exclusively, rested on the broad, cantankerous shoulders of the historian Thucydides. Indeed, Thucydides' own strong opinions on his native city, the possibility that he wrote some sections of his *History* well after their events, his very skill as a writer, and his proven capacity to shape his narrative creatively have sometimes led to the scholarly suspicion that he had at least embellished some of the more gripping parts of his discourse, including the section on the plague. However, during the 1990s, construction projects for the 2004 Olympics in Athens yielded numerous exciting discoveries involving Classical Athens; among them, in 1994 a burial pit at the ancient Kerameikos cemetery that can be dated, based on vases found in the site, to the early years of the Peloponnesian War.[1] This, however, was no ordinary sepulcher, but is characterized by a neglect of traditional burial customs. The roughly 150 skeletons found there were interred in a plain pit composed in an irregular shape, with the bodies of the dead apparently having been laid out in a disorganized, random fashion. Further, no soil had been deposited between the layers of corpses. The bodies were found in outstretched positions, though a number had their heads pointed to the outside and their feet toward the center of the grave. Moreover, the lower levels seemed more orderly composed and the upper in apparent chaos, with evidence that, at the later stages of internment, bodies had simply been dumped on top of one another. The number of votive offerings found in the pit were inappropriate in both number and scale, further suggesting a rushed and unplanned burial. Clearly, some catastrophe was afflicting Athens at this time. We know from the imaginative works of Greek literature from Homer through Sophocles, from the archaeological record and from historical documents that the proper burial of the dead human body was one of the most

[1] See Baziotopoulou-Valavani 2000.

overriding values in ancient Greek culture. In Thucydides' own narrative, the account of the plague immediately follows the account of the extremely structured burial of the first soldiers who had fallen in the Peloponnesian War, and Thucydides' telling of the effect of the plague depicts those burial customs quickly being thrown into confusion. All told, the recently discovered archaeological evidence suggests a city in a state of panic, disregarding its most fundamental and sacred customs of burial, desperate to dispose of the infected bodies as quickly as possible. Thucydides' picture of Athens at that time suddenly seems more powerful, indeed more unquestionably accurate, than ever.

In this book, I explore the consequences of this plague for the imagination of Athens during its course and for the two decades following its conclusion in 426. The plague enters Athenian discourse immediately and is visible, once one accepts how deeply it had affected Athens, throughout a number of texts and through their relationship with a major construction project on the south slope of the Acropolis, the Athenian Asklepieion, next to the Theater of Dionysus, where Athenians watched performances of dramas that engaged the plague and its aftermath much more meaningfully than has previously been thought. This, then, is not a book about the plague or "what it really was," but it examines the effect of the plague on selected elements of Athenian culture from the epidemic's onset in 430 to the production of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in 409.[2]

[2] Papagrigorakis *et al.* 2006 now show through an analysis of DNA in the skeletons that typhoid fever was almost certainly the cause of the plague.

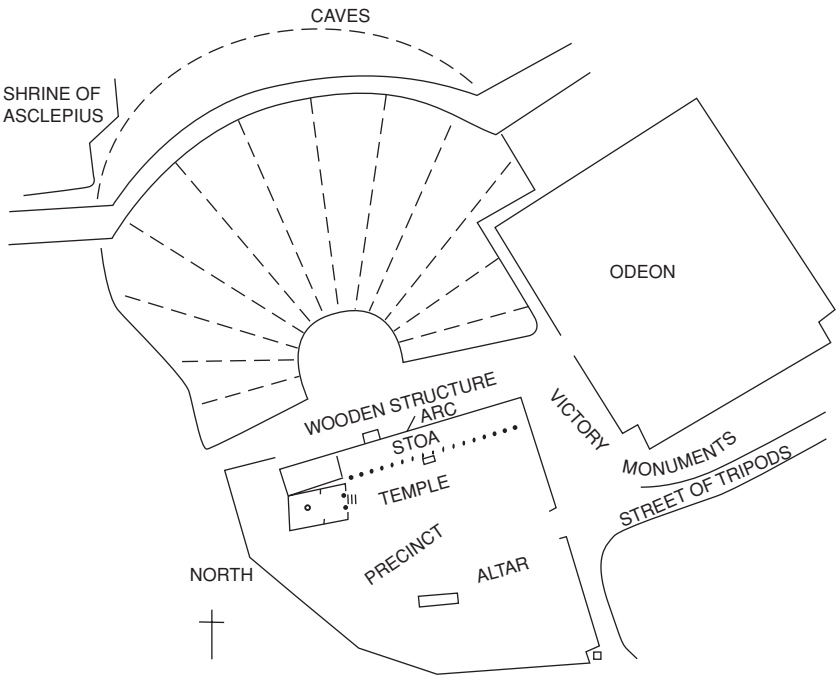

Figure 1. The Theater of Dionysus, after the building of the Stoa at the end of the classical period
(Source Wiles 2000: 101)