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TURNING CRISES INTO DRAMA: THE MANAGEMENT OF EPIDEMICS IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY*

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ABSTRACT

Despite the contrasting political contexts in which epidemics struck societies in Classical Antiquity, ranging from the Athenian plague of 430 BC to the outbreaks of the Antonine age, Rosenberg's model of patterned responses to epidemics seems as applicable as it does to the case studies in modern history which he addressed. Neither secularism, nor scientific humanism, nor clinical medicine sufficed to calm the fears of ordinary people, and political leaders and authorities sought closure through religious rituals. Thus, indeed, epidemics acquired dramaturgic form.

Introduction

We are here concerned with epidemics in the technical medical sense of the term, but the term is commonly used by society as a label for a situation that it wishes to recognise as of common concern. Thus it has been applied metaphorically to problems such as alcoholism, road rage or car hijacking. The metaphorical uses tend to indicate the topicality of the problem: a society at a particular time focuses on a social ill which it sees as new or at a new level of intensity. Rosenberg, in referring to diseases, comments that 'epidemics have a unity of place as well as time, and even worldwide epidemics are experienced and responded to at the local level as a series of discrete incidents.'¹ Thus, yellow fever, for example, which apparently originated in Africa, only became an 'epidemic' when it hit port cities in America and Europe.² Put in another way, the distinction between the term

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at a seminar of the Ancient Studies group held at the Institute of Classical Studies in London, 2000, and at the biennial conference of CASA held at UNISA in January 2001. In both cases I benefited from the discussions which followed, and I am particularly grateful to Louise Cilliers and Manfred Horstmannshoff for their valuable assistance. Their assistance is not to be construed as full approval of this final version.

¹ C. Rosenberg, *Explaining Epidemics, and Other Studies in the History of Medicine* (Cambridge 1992) esp. chap. 13, quotations here from pp. 278-79.

² R. Maulitz, 'Reflections on yellow fever and AIDS', in D. Gourevitch (ed.), *Maladie et maladies, histoire et conceptualisation ... Mélanges ... M. Grmek* (Geneva 1992) 375-88.

'epidemic' and the terms 'pandemic' and 'endemic' is not always made according to the medical definitions of these terms. Rosenberg goes on to state that 'as a social phenomenon, an epidemic has a dramaturgic form', and he presents the drama as having three acts: recognition, response and retrospection.³ The model is improved if we add prologue with *parodos* before Rosenberg's first act. Rosenberg was dealing with modern history, and in particular with HIV/AIDS, but how well does his model fit the epidemics of classical antiquity?

It can be objected that Rosenberg's scheme is retrospective, and 'has already been imposed on the material by Thucydides, who used the dramatic scheme for historiographical reasons.'⁴ That may be true for Thucydides, but the question here is whether such historical evidence as we have in respect of the other epidemics in antiquity fits Rosenberg's model. To serve as a predictive model it would require amplification and the specification of preconditions, but the contention here is that it serves as a useful framework for historical analysis.

In the modern world the recognition of an epidemic may be bound up with legal and financial issues relating to the medical insurance industry, healthcare provision, pharmaceutical research and drug pricing, and state or local authority budgets. Thus governmental authorities, the medical profession and the courts have been drawn into disputes concerning phenomena such as chronic fatigue syndrome, known in the United Kingdom as myalgic encephalomyelitis, and the Gulf War syndrome, whose very existence as identifiable diseases is questioned in both medical and lay circles. The scale of the threat of the Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) is debated, though earlier denials of the existence of scientific evidence of a link between BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) and CJD have changed to the admission that the linkage is scientifically possible;⁵ and even the connection between HIV and AIDS and the labelling of HIV as an epidemic are matters of dispute. A government may have a budgetary reason for questioning whether

³ Rosenberg (note 1) 278-79.

⁴ An objection noted by Hortsmanshoff, whom I have quoted here. He echoes J. Longrigg's comment on Thucydides' account of the plague, in Longrigg's 'Epidemics, ideas and classical Athenian society', in T. Ranger & P. Slack (eds), *Epidemics and Ideas* (Cambridge 1992) 21-44, esp. 32.

⁵ Relevant websites include www.bse.org.uk and www.cjd.ed.ac.uk.

everyone found HIV positive should be treated as a potential AIDS sufferer. Statistics on the occurrence of AIDS on the African continent suggest that the disease has become a 'problem' when denial has yielded to recognition.

While the legal and financial issues relating to the recognition of epidemics in modern society may seem remote from the institutions of antiquity, nevertheless the 'service providers' of pre-modern societies came under similar pressure to be seen to act when an epidemic struck. Here Rosenberg's generalisation about recognition at a local level requires some amplification. Where a problem is localised, as when a hospital has to confront a meningitis outbreak or MRSA (methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus), the primary responsibility for addressing the problem is obviously localised, but more generally it could be said that a local response will emerge at any level at which there is an answerable authority. This verges on the tautologous, but scale and structure would, for example, explain why, in the case of Attica, responses were initiated at *polis* rather than deme level, why the Senate had to address the crisis in the city of Rome, whether or not it had to worry about how an epidemic was affecting other communities or even provinces, and why Justinian had to treat Constantinople as a special case, whatever else he chose to do for other communities in the Empire which were affected by the plague.

Another of Rosenberg's generalisations would hold for antiquity as well as for modern history in that, when an epidemic strikes, the society affected seeks a framework of understanding, consolation and the prospect of release. In antiquity as in more recent history, the hysteria that often attended an epidemic required more than practical executive action to palliate the effects and consequences of the disease. The starting point is, and was, the official or ritual recognition of the reality of the epidemic. The issue may require some political judgement, since recognition of a disease may cause panic (arguably early warnings to hospital staff about the contagiousness of AIDS in some situations created more hysteria than rational understanding) and public denial may starve a scare of oxygen.

Act Two in Rosenberg's scheme is the response, which he would divide into two scenes, the first being the search for an explanation of the epidemic, whether that be the identification of a virus or a revelation, such as that the gods must be angry; and the second being a mix of practical measures and more psychological aids to assist the community. Perceptions of the aetiology of an epidemic are a reality with which political authorities

have to deal. The case of HIV and AIDS shows the potential for post-modern responses to be as irrational or unscientific as some responses in antiquity. For example, attitudinal surveys conducted in the USA showed, *inter alia*, that in November 1987 some 43% of Americans considered AIDS to be God's way of punishing society for moral decline, and, in another survey, that some physicians, given a free choice, would only treat those tested HIV positive if they contracted the disease 'innocently'.⁶

For Rosenberg, Act Three is reflection on the epidemic when the crisis has abated. The classic ancient examples of reflections on epidemics are Thucydides' account of the plague of 430 BC, and Procopius' treatment of the plague that began in the Byzantine world in AD 541. The intertextual references in Procopius, *Bella* 2.22-23 to Thucydides 2.47-51 are clear, and also serve to draw attention to the differences between the two accounts, but Procopius and that analysis fall outside the scope of this paper.

At the scientific level the author of the Hippocratic *Epidemics* sets out a check list of factors which doctors might consider when reviewing the experience of epidemics: common and individual symptoms, the individual patient's circumstances, the prescribed regimens, the prescribers, climatic and geographical features.⁷ The writer claims to be referring to epidemic fevers (cf. 1.14.1), but curiously does not address the mechanism of contagion. As Jones notes, the writer deals more with endemic diseases and is strangely silent about the Athenian plague and other such epidemics.⁸ Indeed the Greek term *epidemos* in the Hippocratic corpus does not have the same key sense as its English derivative, as, for example, jaundice is said to be 'epidemic' because it can arise at any time of the year. The writer goes on to say that one may contract jaundice from being full or drunk, if one has a chill.⁹ The term 'epidemic' might also be applied to running a clinic in some place away from the home surgery.¹⁰

⁶ D.W. Amundsen, *Medicine, Society and Faith in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds* (Baltimore 1996) esp. 23.

⁷ W.H.S. Jones (transl.), *Hippocrates*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass. 1923) *Epidemics* 1.

⁸ Jones (note 7) lv-lvi.

⁹ P. Potter (transl.), *Hippocrates*, Vol. 6 (Cambridge, Mass. 1988) 196-97: *Internal Affections* 37.

¹⁰ In the Hippocratic Corpus, at *Decorum* 8, Jones (note 7) 2.290-91, reads ἀποδημίας, noting that M has ἐπιδημίας. This meaning of 'epidemics' ('visits abroad') is accepted by G. Majno, *The Healing Hand* (Harvard 1975) 193.

But there there are indications that there was some speculation about the mechanics of contagion in Thucydides' day: while many shunned contact with plague victims from superstitious fear, and some may well have inferred general rules from what they observed,¹¹ Thucydides was, as far as we know, the first to write about contagion and acquired immunity.¹² P. Demont argues that a significant element in Thucydides' account was his insistence that the disease spread to the animal world (2.50.1). Thus Thucydides was taking issue with medical theorists who claimed that plagues were species specific.¹³ It is possible that the atomists Democritus and Leucippus theorised about the particles that transmitted diseases, and it is possible that the image of the seeds of disease can be traced back from Galen as far as to Anaxagoras.¹⁴

The Athenian Plague

When the 'plague' struck Athens in 430 BC, it put to the test a participatory democracy, which was already in something of a political crisis because the Periclean strategy required the evacuation of the countryside when the Peloponnesian troops invaded Attica. Thucydides says that one of the most terrible aspects of the disaster was that, as individuals realized that they had contracted the disease, they became despondent and gave up the will to resist (2.51.4). This became a *topos* of later accounts of epidemics, and is not of great value in itself. Thucydides states that supplication and divination were tried, but to no avail, and people were overwhelmed by the disaster (2.47.4). The myths that underpinned the social order were shattered, and

¹¹ J. Solomon, 'Thucydides and the recognition of contagion', *Maia* 37 (1985) 121-23, noting especially Thuc. 2.51.5.

¹² Thuc. 2.51.5-6 and 58.2; A.J. Holladay & J.C.F. Poole, 'Thucydides and the plague of Athens', *CQ* 29 (1979) 282-300, esp. 295-300, and Holladay, 'New developments in the problem of the Athenian plague', *CQ* 38 (1988) 247-50. P. Demont, 'Hérodote et les pestilences', *Revue de Philologie* 62 (1988) 7-13, esp. 8, notes that here and at 1.23.3 Thucydides deals with spread of the disease without reference to any divine force.

¹³ P. Demont, 'Notes sur le récit de la peste athénienne chez Thucydide', in F. Lausserre & P. Mudry (eds), *Formes de pensée dans la Collection Hippocratique* (Geneva 1983) esp. 345-47.

¹⁴ The issues are fully discussed and referenced by V. Nutton, 'The seeds of disease: an explanation of contagion and infection from the Greeks to the Renaissance', *Medical History* 27 (1983) 1-34.

the result was a confusion of anarchic and hedonistic behaviour.

There is more rhetoric than analysis in Thucydides' account, and, as Longrigg puts it, Thucydides' 'harrowing description of the plague is dramatically exploited for historiographical purposes.'¹⁵ Nevertheless, there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that we are dealing with more than Thucydidean fiction. The reality may have been that for a brief period Athens gave up the semblance of democracy (cf. Thuc. 2.65.9), and became a radical democracy. There was not an authority figure to manage the crisis. The eponymous archon of 430/29, Apollodorus, was, it would seem, a nonentity, leaving no record but his name.¹⁶ The archon basileus was sacral leader for the year: the office was open to all but the thetes (if economic class was of political significance); and the officer was chosen by sortition, and his duties extended beyond the ceremonial to the administrative and judicial spheres.¹⁷ He was therefore to some extent an executive officer of the state, and was not chosen for his spiritual leadership. In an earlier period, the Areopagus might have been expected to take the initiative in a matter affecting Athens' relationship with the gods, but by Pericles' day constitutional law and practice gave priority to the Boule.¹⁸ While the Boule was responsible for a number of religious rites, it was principally an administrative, regulatory and juridical body, and its size and composition ill equipped it to provide religious leadership in such a crisis. The prytany council had the responsibility to act in an emergency, but as a short-term rotational council it had limited experience and authority.

The natural leader was Pericles, who had authority as a *strategos*, with an unrivalled record of multiple terms in that office. But it was obvious that the epidemic was exacerbated, if not caused, by the concentration of the non-combatant population of Attica within the confines of the city walls (Thuc. 2.52.1), which was a necessary part of the Periclean strategy for winning the war against Sparta and her allies (Thuc. 1.143.4-5). Thus, rather than look to Pericles for leadership, the Athenians turned against him and

¹⁵ Longrigg (note 4) esp. 32.

¹⁶ D.S. 12.43.1; Athenaeus 5.217a-b; the name is restored in *IG* i² 378, but the reading is rejected in *IG* i³ 411.

¹⁷ Sortition: Isocrates 2.6; duties: Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 57.1; R.S.J. Garland, 'Religious authority in archaic and classical Athens', *ABSA* 79 (1984) 79-80 and 111-12.

¹⁸ The evidence on the role of the Boule in religion is conveniently assembled by P.J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule* (Oxford 1972, revised 1985) esp. 127-34.

fined him (Thuc. 2.65.3), unless Diodorus and Plutarch mean that they both fined him and removed him from office.¹⁹ Early in 430 Pericles had been able to refuse to convene a meeting of the Assembly, which must mean a special meeting of the Assembly,²⁰ and which reflects the constitutional power which he held as *strategos*, but equally the charisma he had to be able to block the will of the people. But after the campaign to the Peloponnese in 430, and after the effects of the plague had further demoralised the populace, Pericles, seeing the people's anger about their situation, convened a special meeting of the Assembly (Thuc. 2.59.3). Thucydides presents the episode as an initiative which Pericles took, still as *strategos*, to stem the tide of opposition to the war. He was in fact forced to address their perception of the crisis. These two episodes illustrate the relative power of the *strategoï* and Boule, but at the same time show that, as Pericles' popularity waned, there was a shift towards more radical democracy. However, the radicalism was short-lived as Pericles was soon afterwards re-elected to a generalship (Thuc. 2.65.4).

Insofar as Athens was a secular society, in which rationalism was supposed to prevail, it was difficult for Athenians not to see a connection between the epidemic and the war strategy, which necessitated the concentration of the populace in the city and imposed abnormal living conditions. The Peloponnese was relatively unaffected (Thuc. 2.54.5). Reason might point to the factors that contributed to the spread of the disease, but doctors were of little help in checking the epidemic, as Thucydides shows; and the tradition that Hippocrates took pre-emptive action to limit the damage done by the plague is apocryphal.²¹ Admittedly, it may be misleading to assume a popular hope or expectation that doctors would be able to help, if their expertise was seen to lie in prognosis rather than diagnosis, and they were expected to flee the scene when their prognosis was that

¹⁹ D.S. 12.45.3 sq.; Plut. *Pericles* 35.4.

²⁰ Thuc. 2.22.1 with A.W. Gomme, *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides*, Vol. 2 (Oxford 1956) 76.

²¹ *The Life of Hippocrates* attributed to Soranus, section 7, in J. Ilberg (ed.), *Soranus* (Leipzig 1927) 176; Hippocratic Corpus, *Letters* 25; E. Littré, *Oeuvres complètes d'Hippocrate*, Vol. 1 (Paris 1839, reprinted Amsterdam 1961) 39-42 for discussion, and Vol. 9 (1962) 400-02 for *Letters* 25. Letter 25 is the pseudo-decree of the Athenians honouring Hippocrates. The text and a translation of this decree appear in W.D. Smith, *Hippocrates: Pseudepigraphic Writings* (Leiden 1990) 106-07, with an introduction, 4-5.

medical help would not avail.²²

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* reflects a wistful view of how things might have been in a different political order. In the opening scene, a chorus representing Thebans of all ages, led by the priest of Zeus, approaches their king as suppliants to ask him to find a way of bringing the plague to an end. Thus far the story follows the line of epidemic dramaturgy: popular concern leads to an appeal to the head of state to acknowledge the plague and to act. Oedipus, as a man of action, assures them that he has already sent Creon to Delphi to consult the oracle to discover what word or action is required of him to rescue Thebes from its troubles (*OT*, esp. 68-72). The date of the play is uncertain, but it is generally, and reasonably, held to have been first performed after the outbreak of the plague in Athens.²³ In the romantic, but harsh world of mythology, the leader, acting with divine guidance, discovers the scapegoat, whose removal restores divine favour. In Athens, as in Thebes, the tragedy was, as Sophocles saw it, that the process removed the city's most able leader. In a less flawed society, purposive leadership, oracular consultation and propitiatory or expiatory rites would have satisfied both populace and gods. This simple solution was the experience of the citizens of Cleonae, who in the context of the plague of the 420s, consulted Delphi, were instructed to sacrifice a goat, and after following the instruction were relieved of the plague.²⁴

The Athenian reality was that in the context of the early disasters in

²² H.F.J. Horstmanshoff, 'Over de machteloosheid van de artsen en de nutteloosheid van gebeden: pestilenties in de Griekse wereld 800-400 v.C.', in H.F.J. Horstmanshoff *et al.* (eds.), *Pijn en Balsem, Troost en Smart* (Rotterdam 1994) 33-51. He includes a section on the meaning of the term *prognosis* in the Hippocratic tradition, which he also deals with in 'The ancient physician: craftsman or scientist?', *Journal of the History of Medicine* 45 (1990) 176-97; cf. S. Swain, 'Man and medicine in Thucydides', *Arethusa* 27 (1994) 303-27, esp. 315sq.

²³ R.M. Newton, 'Hippolytus and the dating of *Oedipus Tyrannus*', *GRBS* 21 (1980) 5-22 argues for 429 BC; B. Knox, 'The date of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles', *AJP* 77 (1956) 133-47 proposes 425; C. Diano, 'Edipo figlio della Tyche', *Dioniso* 15 (1952) 56-89, esp. 81-87 argues that the play reflects the political situation of 411. Diano's case is not accepted by G. Serra, *Edipo e la peste* (Venice 1994) esp. 27-28. Others have argued for a date earlier than 429: for example, C.W. Müller, *Zur Datierung des Sophokleischen Ödipus* (Wiesbaden 1984), argues that the choice lies between 436, 434 and 433, but see the review of N.G. Wilson, *CR* 35 (1985) 181.

²⁴ Pausanias 10.11.5, cited by J.D. Mikalson, 'Religion and the plague in Athens', in A.L. Boegehold *et al.* (eds), *Studies presented to Sterling Dow ...* (Durham, NC 1984) 218. In n. 6, Mikalson indexes all the plague-related appeals to Delphi covered in J. Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle* (Berkeley 1978).

the war, Pericles was not able to command general respect: he had neither the constitutional nor the moral authority to assert leadership. Secondly, Delphi was not a friendly, nor even a neutral oracular centre, as Athenians would have seen it. Apollo was the deity responsible for plagues,²⁵ and at the political level, Delphi was seen as favouring the Spartans. Before the war began, the Spartans were said to have consulted Delphi, and to have received encouragement to go to war with Athens.²⁶ There is epigraphic evidence that anti-Athenian dedications were accepted at the oracle – a dedication of 423 by Brasidas and the Akanthians, who had abandoned the Athenian alliance.²⁷ Aristophanes, *Birds* 188sq. indicates that the Thebans could make it difficult for Athenians to get to Delphi, but it is not necessary to believe that the Athenians were debarred from approaching the oracle.²⁸ Nevertheless, in 430/29 Athenian leaders could not have expected the oracle at Delphi to provide a morale-boosting prescription to calm the populace.

This gap in the resources available to Athenian leaders may help to explain Athens' dedication of a thank-offering at Dodona,²⁹ as a way of fostering a good relationship with this Epirote oracle of Zeus. But the assistance of Dodona apparently came with a price, as the Athenians were instructed to placate the Thracian goddess Bendis, and to make contributions to her cult centre in the Peiraeus.³⁰ and the project initiated in 426/25 of purifying Delos and developing it as an oracular centre for the Ionians.³¹ Mikalson notes that the decision on Delos coincided with the end of the plague.³² From 430 the Athenians had continued with traditional funerary rites, festivals and ceremonies – or at least some of the major festivals;³³

²⁵ The plague-avertter could equally be the plague-despatcher: cf. Callim., Fr. 194.28-30, with the gloss of Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 8.48 (2.359 Stählin); cf. G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus conlecta* (Berlin 1878) 448-50, no. 1034, lines 29-30 (apparently of the Antonine period).

²⁶ Thuc. 1.118.3; cf. 2.54.4.

²⁷ *SIG*³ 79.

²⁸ S. Hornblower, *A Commentary on Thucydides*, Vol. 1 (Oxford 1991) 521-22, argues against the view of H. Parke, *The Oracles of Zeus* (Oxford 1967) 149 and 136, that the Athenians 'probably had no access to Delphi.'

²⁹ *SIG*³ 73, with Parke (note 28) 136, dating it to 429, though as Hornblower (note 28) 521 notes, the inscription is not dated.

³⁰ S. Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge 1999) 77-78. *IG* i³ 136 attests public contributions to the cult.

³¹ Thuc. 3.104.1, mentioning that it began with an oracular instruction; D.S. 12.58.6-7.

³² Mikalson (note 24) 221.

but the undermining of the myths that had underpinned the social order called for the creation of new myths and rituals to stabilize Athens – or so, it would seem, an influential group of Athenian leaders was persuaded. The tragedy of the plague was concluded with a dramatic renewal of Delos as a cult centre for Apollo. The measures taken to ensure that death and childbirth would not happen on Delos must have had significance in the aftermath of the plague.³⁴

But still the Athenians were not finished with the religious response to the epidemic. In 430/29 a communal approach to Asclepius at Epidaurus would have been an option for seeking divine assistance, but more political and strategic concerns prevailed, and in the summer of 430 Pericles led an expeditionary force to the Peloponnese and made the territory of Epidaurus his first target (Thuc. 2.56). As the plague intensified and continued and the search for religious comfort developed, the idea was formulated of importing the cult of Asclepius from Epidaurus. This could not happen much before 420, and it was left to the supposedly private initiative of one Telemachus to arrange the introduction of the cult and to establish the city Asklepieion.³⁵ Garland convincingly argued that behind the private initiative lay some official policy, and that Telemachus' project was deemed to have the support of the people: certainly, when the cult was first introduced, it was temporarily housed in the City Eleusinion, and, what seems to have been a demarcation dispute with the Kerykes over priestly control of the cult was adjudicated in favour of Telemachus.³⁶ In his more recent book, Garland veers towards emphasizing Telemachus' private initiative: 'there is little reason to doubt that his motives were entirely personal'; but the immediate context of this quotation is a section where he dismisses the idea that Telemachus may

³³ Mikalson (note 24) 219; R.S.J. Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (Ithaca 1992) 114-15. The continuation of some rituals does not give the lie to Thucydides' observation on the loss of faith in traditional religion (2.53.4), *pace* Longrigg (note 4) 28: observance of some traditions by the appointed officials could well have coexisted with disillusionment at the popular level with established public cults.

³⁴ Cf. W.A. Laidlaw, *A History of Delos* (Oxford 1933) esp. 67-68. Nicias made political profit out of the inauguration of the new festival on Delos: Plut. *Nicias* 3.

³⁵ *SEG* 25.226 (earlier *IG* ii² 4960). Aristophanes, *Vesp.* 122-23, indicates that this happened after 422. A history of the cult in Athens is offered by Sara B. Aleshire, *The Athenian Asklepieion: the People, the Dedications and the Inventories* (Amsterdam 1989); on the foundation date esp. 7-8.

³⁶ *SEG* 25.226.10-12 and 21-23; Garland (note 17) 75-123, esp. 89.

come under the influence of ambitious or proselytizing Epidaurian priests.³⁷ It seems more attractive to link the introduction of the cult of Asclepius with the approach to Dodona and the Delos project, and to see all three as elements of a response to the political crisis caused by the plague.

The Roman Republic

In the early Roman Republic, when an epidemic struck, it was for the Senate to decide whether action was needed, and, if so, to recommend appropriate measures and rituals. The priority of the collective will of the Senate is indicated, for example, in the plagues of 463, 399, 392, 364/63, 347/46, 331, 313, 208 and 174.³⁸ Livy generally indicates that popular discontent preceded the Senate's initiatives, and indeed Republican principles and the conventions of *clientela* would lead one to expect some show of an appeal to which the Senate could respond.

When practical measures did not avail, religious ritual offered a form of collective response to the manifestation of divine displeasure or ill-temper. But when once the Senate embarked on this method of response, the choice was a return to a previously tested ritual or the creation of a new tradition. Repetition had reducing value, and the Senate was under some pressure to devise new dramatic forms, especially when, as in 364/63 and 347/46, a plague persisted or recurred in successive years, and, of course, the occurrence of floods and fires added to the need for supplicatory creativity. In the epidemic of 463, the Senate urged the people to supplicate the gods, and a special role in this was accorded to matrons. In 433 the *duumviri* consulted the Sibylline books, and a temple was vowed to Apollo. The advantage of such a *votum* was that it neither assumed guilt on the part of the supplicants, nor attributed blame to others, and the gods were free to accept or decline the offer. In 399 the Senate again consulted the Sibylline oracle, and duly reported an instruction to celebrate a *lectisternium*, a sacrificial feast for the gods.³⁹ This meant the importation into Rome, and

³⁷ Garland (note 33) 122-23.

³⁸ **463**: Livy 3.7.7; **399**: Livy 5.13.5-6, with Dion. Hal. 12.9.1-3; **392**: Livy 5.31.7-8; **364/63**: Livy 7.2.2-3 and 3.3-4; **347/46**: Livy 7.27.1; **331**: Livy 8.18.2-5; **313**: Livy 9.28.6; **208**: Livy 27.23.6-7; and **174**: Livy 41.21.10.

³⁹ Livy 5.13.4-8, with Dion. Hal. 12.9.1-3.

Roman adaptation, of a Greek ritual, the *theoxenia*.⁴⁰ This was exotic and new, and would not have been accepted had not the Senate manufactured a Sibylline instruction. It seems to have worked, but when the Senate tried a *lectisternium* again, in 364, some additional ritual seemed to be called for, and the Senate imported from Etruria the *ludi scaenici*. But the gods were not amused, and the plague continued. Thus in 363, the Senate came up with a different idea and appointed a dictator *clavi figendi causa*, to nail symbolically the plague to a fixed point and thus to terminate it.⁴¹ The plague which began in 295 BC resulted in the importation of the cult of Asclepius from Epidaurus. As the cult was Greek the Senate opted for a site on an island in the Tiber for the temple, but, as Jackson notes, the importation of the cult opened the way for greater receptiveness of Greek medicine,⁴² although, according to tradition, the first Greek doctor to receive official status in Rome, Archagathus, only arrived in 219 BC.⁴³ But the plague persisted, and in 293 the Senate instructed the *Decemviri sacris faciundis* to consult the Sibylline books, which yielded the recommendation to import the snake of Asclepius from Epidaurus.⁴⁴ As so often, the exercise in ritual creativity to calm the emotions generated by a plague was mixed with some practical sense and purpose, for the island sanctuary of Asclepius offered access to fresh water and suitable quarters for quarantine.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Cf. Athenaeus 6.239b sq.

⁴¹ Livy 7.2.2-3 and 3.4. The issues relating to innovations in Roman cults are fully discussed by J.A. North, 'Conservatism and change in Roman religion', *PBSR* 44 (1976) 1-12, in view of which I should emphasize that, in analysing the political significance of innovations that formed part of the Senate's response to successive epidemics, I am not denying the existence of faith, belief and sincerity as elements in the development of Roman religion.

⁴² R. Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London 1988) 11-12. Livy, *Periocha* 11 puts the creation of the temple in 292, but the story of the importation of Asclepius' snake (Val. Max. 1.8 2 with Livy 10.47.6-7) presupposes that the shrine on the Tiber had been established before 292 BC; cf. Pliny, *NH* 29.16. But D. Degrassi, 'Interventi edilizi sull'isola Tiberina ...', *Athenaeum* 65 (1987) 521-27, esp. 521-24, argues for a foundation date just after 292.

⁴³ Pliny, *NH* 29.6; Jackson (note 42) 31 and 188 n. 33, following V. Nutton, 'Continuity or rediscovery: the city physician in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy', in A. Russell (ed.), *The Town and State Physician in Europe* (Wolfenbüttel 1981) 18.

⁴⁴ Livy 10.47.6-7 and *Periocha* 11, with Val. Max. 1.8 2; the procedure is indicated by Livy 5.13.4-6. The tradition is fully discussed by P. Roesch, 'Le culte d'Asclepios à Rome', in G. Sabah (ed.), *Mémoires III: Médecins et médecine dans l'antiquité* (Saint-Étienne 1982) 171-79.

⁴⁵ On the range of issues associated with this episode, see D. Wardle, *Valerius Maximus. Memorable Deeds and Sayings, Book 1* (Oxford 1998) 248-52.

The pattern of responses to epidemics persisted at least through the Middle Republic. Naturally, one can associate with each crisis various practical measures and political compromises,⁴⁶ but it is clear that the senatorial aristocracy was heavily dependent on ritual drama to bind the community together in some form of collective response to each major epidemic.

The political forces were complex: failure by the Senate to respond could be as risky as could the appearance of yielding to pressure; supplicatory rituals needed to have a better than even chance of bringing an epidemic to an end, unless they were delayed till the epidemic had receded; innovation which required the importation of alien cult might meet with resistance. Furthermore, a theist explanation of a plague had its perils: if the gods were angry, with whom were they angry and for what reason? Scapegoating could rebound against the Senate or any of its members. Tradition had it that, in the Early Republic, the supplicants sought from the gods peace and pardon,⁴⁷ which worked as long as the people collectively sought pardon from the gods.

Recognition of the scale of the problem and the response required was a matter of political judgement. In 428 BC, self-appointed seers fed on the hysteria created by a plague, till the Senate instructed the aediles to organize worship of the traditional gods in the traditional way.⁴⁸ On this occasion, conservatism was preferred, and, by implication, countered an exaggeration of the seriousness of the plague. It appears that in 411 the Senate quietly carried on with practical measures to alleviate the famine that accompanied a plague.⁴⁹

The Senate seems to have been least in control of the situation in 331, when they allowed an epidemic to be blamed on poisoners. The curule aedile approached the consuls, who took the matter to the Senate, and the outcome was a trial of matrons charged with witchcraft: some 170 were convicted.⁵⁰ Ironically the convictions that resulted from this scapegoating did not end the mass hysteria, and the Senate still had to resort to the tradition

⁴⁶ For example, in 399 the compromises included an amnesty for prisoners (Livy 5.13.8).

⁴⁷ Livy 3.7.7-8 and Val. Max. 1.1.1.

⁴⁸ Livy 4.30.8-10.

⁴⁹ Livy 4.52.5.

⁵⁰ Livy 8.18, with Val. Max. 2.5.3 and Orosius 3.10.1-3. S.P. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI-X*. Vol. 2: *Books VII-VIII* (Oxford 1998) 594-97, accepts the historicity of the episode and reviews the juridical issues.

of appointing a dictator to drive in a nail as an expiatory ritual.

The Principate

Three episodes from the early Principate serve to illustrate the continuation of the pattern. In 22 BC, the combination of a plague, flooding, electrical storms and famine led citizens of Rome to mass in the streets and demonstrate before the Senate, clamouring for the appointment of Augustus as Dictator.⁵¹ Obviously there was probably some organisation behind this show of popular feeling, but, as in the Oedipus story, it marks the first stage of the drama – the appeal to the authorities to recognise the crisis and act. Secondly, in AD 79, when a plague followed the eruption of Vesuvius, Titus is said to have responded with an array of practical measures and every conceivable form of sacrifice to attract divine aid.⁵² Thirdly, an episode of AD 15 shows that an emperor might resist pressure on him to treat a disaster - in this case a flood rather than a plague – as requiring the most serious form of religious response. Asinius Gallus proposed in the Senate that there be a consultation of the Sibylline oracle, but Tiberius vetoed the motion, while initiating practical steps to address the problem.⁵³ This was not the first time that Asinius Gallus, Vipsania's second husband, sought to embarrass Tiberius, her former husband, and to enmesh him in a political trap,⁵⁴ but Tiberius refused to allow him to exploit popular superstition.

The Antonine Plague

The Antonine plague was to be a test of the medical profession, for this was the great age of the philosopher-doctors, men of high status, who taught medicine, theorised about it and conducted scientific investigations⁵⁵ – as

⁵¹ Dio Cass. 53.1-3; cf. *RGDA* 5.1.

⁵² Dio Cass. 66.23 with Victor, *Epit.* 10.13 and Eusebius, *Chron.* ad. Ann. 77 (sic), though Victor and Eusebius link these measures with the eruption of the volcano.

⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 1.76.1.

⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 1.12.

⁵⁵ J. Korpela, *Das Medizinpersonal im antiken Rom* (Helsinki 1987) esp. chap. 6; and on the further development of a hierarchy in the medical profession, V. Nutton, 'From Galen to Alexander. Aspects of medicine and medical practice in late antiquity', *DOP* 38 (1984) 1-14. On the significance of Galen in the history of medicine, see E. Romano, *Medici e filosofi: letteratura medica e società altoimperiale* (Palermo 1991).

distinct from the quacks, medical ‘tradesmen’, faith-healers and others who peopled the lower levels of the pyramid of ‘doctors’.⁵⁶ Galen, who had been busy in Rome for three years, deemed it prudent to make a rapid departure. He says in the same section that the Keep-science-out-of-medicine brigade (the *antitechnoi*) resented any praise given to those whom they envied and they called these acclaimed doctors the book-doctors.⁵⁷

Galen and indeed the hypochondriac sophist (or *rhetor*, since he rejected the label sophist) Aristides illustrate the wealth of serious comment that was made on the possible causes, symptoms, stages and prognosis of the plague,⁵⁸ and on measures that could be taken to ameliorate the effects and check its spread. There was no obvious advantage for the emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, in pontificating on the issues. Nevertheless, it is significant that, in 167 or early 168, Marcus Aurelius celebrated a *lectisternium* according to Roman traditional rites, but extended to a seven-day festival. Although the author of the *Historia Augusta* presents this as a propitiatory rite before the start of the military campaign against the Marcomanni,⁵⁹ he follows this immediately with a reference to the plague, and it seems preferable to link the rites with the plague. Furthermore, as we have seen, the *lectisternium* was first introduced into Rome as a desperate measure to halt a plague.⁶⁰ Thus it seems logical to relate the revival of this ancient custom to the epidemic which medical science and magic seemed powerless to stop. The *Historia Augusta* goes on to mention the practical steps which Marcus Aurelius took, in particular with regard to the regulations on burials, but for our purposes the most significant point is that Marcus Aurelius found that he could not manage the crisis at a purely administrative level, and was ultimately obliged to organize a ritual drama. Later still, in the

⁵⁶ The image of the pyramid should not imply that there was in Galen’s day a regulated hierarchy, policed by the guardians of successive grades of examination: cf. V. Nutton, ‘The medical meeting place’, in Ph.J. van der Eijk *et al.* (eds), *Ancient Medicine in its Socio-Cultural Context*, Vol. 1 (Amsterdam 1995) 3-25; J. André, *Être médecin à Rome* (Paris 1987).

⁵⁷ Galen, *De libris propriis*, in C.G. Kühn (ed.), *Opera omnia* (Leipzig 1821-33) esp. Vol. 14, 15.

⁵⁸ But we do not have from that period an account of the plague to match what Thucydides and Procopius provide. References to the plague in Galen, Aelius Aristides other writers are conveniently collected by C.A. Behr, *Aelius Aristides. The Complete Works*. Vol. 2: *Orations XVII-LIII* (Leiden 1981) esp. 96sq.

⁵⁹ *Hist. Aug., Vita Marci Antonini* 13.2.

⁶⁰ Dion. Hal. *Ant.* 12.9 1-3.

context of events of AD 172/73, as the pandemic was still persistent, Marcus Aurelius most diligently revived the cult of the gods.⁶¹

The pattern of communal response to the Antonine pandemic at the local level is further illustrated by verse inscriptions from various cities in Asia Minor.⁶² First, the citizens of Caesarea Troketta in Lydia consulted the oracle of Apollo at Claros,⁶³ which was situated close to Notion and Colophon. The context was a destructive plague, and, while the inscription cannot be dated precisely, an Antonine date is generally assumed and seems reasonable. The ritual prescribed by the oracle involved lustration and the fumigation of houses, and the citizens were also instructed to erect a statue of Apollo. The references to clean drinking water and fumigation suggest that the city officials and the oracle were forming some practical measures to curb the epidemic. The rituals and the erection of a statue allowed the community to respond to the crisis with collective action. The oracle also addresses the common concern in epidemics to understand the randomness of the affliction. The consolatory argument is that the plague has struck every age group, and has not been discriminatory, but the oracle provides for further reflection on the underlying cause of the plague, when it opens with the image of Plague rushing onto the plain with the sword of vengeance in one hand (verses 7-9).

The consolatory line is similarly stressed in the oracular response of Clarian Apollo to the citizens of Hierapolis (Pammukale) in Phrygia. Again the inscription is undated, but in first publishing the text, Pugliese Carratelli accepted that the epigraphical style could be consistent with an Antonine date for the plague to which it refers.⁶⁴ The Hierapolitans are told that they are not the only ones to suffer: the plague has afflicted many other cities and peoples. Again the oracle blames no individual or group in society, but urges the Hierapolitans to placate the enraged gods. Why the gods should be enraged is left to later reflection.

⁶¹ *Hist. Aug., Vita Marci Antonini* 21.6.

⁶² Five cases are conveniently translated and reviewed by H.W. Parke, *The Oracles of Apollo in Asia Minor* (London 1985) esp. 150-57.

⁶³ The background to the oracular response is set out in the dedication which precedes the metrical text. K. Buresch, 'Ἀπόλλων Κλάριος: *Untersuchungen zum Orakelwesen des späteren Altertums* (Leipzig 1889) with text at 10-11.

⁶⁴ G. Pugliese Carratelli, 'Χρησμοί δι' Ἀπόλλω Καρείου καὶ Ἀπόλλω Κλαρίου ἐν Ἱερὰπολιν ἐν Φρυγίᾳ', *Annuario della Scuola Archeologia di Atene* 41-42 (n.s. 25-26) 1963-64 (Rome 1965) 351-70, esp. 357-65, and on the dating, 362.

The oracular prescription covers a more elaborate set of libations, fumigation and sacrifices; another statue of Apollo, as archer attacking the plague from afar; and finally an instruction that after the plague has abated, the Hierapolitans are to send a group of boys and girls to Colophon to complete the propitiation of Apollo.⁶⁵ There is a complaint that the Hierapolitans have been slow in the past to send thank-offerings to Colophon. The instruction to renew regular contributions to the oracle sets an item for the reflection phrase, and suggests that there was a regional political agenda which went beyond the issues relating to the plague.

The pattern of communal appeals to an oracle and metrical responses with lists of instructions can be illustrated by another Greek inscription, in this case from Callipolis on the Gallipoli promontory.⁶⁶ Here, too, the oracle – probably the oracle of Apollo at Claros - prescribes rituals and the erection of a statue, but there is no suggestion here that Callipolis should make contributions to the oracle in the future.⁶⁷ Callipolis was too remote from Colophon.

These examples from Asia Minor illustrate the truth of Rosenberg's observation that, even when a plague is widely spread or pandemic, it is responded to at the local level as a series of discrete incidents.⁶⁸

Conclusion

The history of epidemics in antiquity shows that the recognition by civil authorities of such epidemics was a matter of political calculation and not automatic. Recognition required response, and that meant not only taking practical measures to contain the disease and deal with its consequences, but also addressing the despair, panic or anger of the people. Epidemic management might often require the control of hysteria. Common to the cases we have considered was the use of religious ritual and cultic innovations

⁶⁵ L. Robert (ed.), *Les fouilles de Claros: Conférence ... Ankara ... 1953* (Limoges 1954) esp. 6, notes that the epigraphical evidence gives no indication that Claros was ever autonomous or independent of Colophon.

⁶⁶ Kaibel (note 25) 448-50, no. 1034.

⁶⁷ In this case, too, an Antonine date is assumed, and the further assumption has to be made that the oracle addressed was that of Claros: cf. Parke (note 62) 152.

⁶⁸ Rosenberg (note 1).

to provide closure for traumatic situations. Beyond the epidemic lay the reflective stage, best illustrated by Thucydides' observations on the Athenian plague. The recurring pattern well justifies Rosenberg's image of an epidemic as a dramaturgic happening.