Perhaps the most significant and telling impact of the plague was its effects on the quality of political leadership at Athens. Within 2.5 years of the war’s

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outbreak, the plague claimed the life of Pericles, the greatest statesman of the era. With few exceptions, the ancient sources speak in one voice of his wisdom, courage, and incorruptibility. In describing his many virtues, Plutarch employs a variety of flattering phrases such as ‘‘loftiness of spirit’’ and ‘‘majestic demeanor.’’ Thucydides, even though his belonging to a rival

oligarchic family praises Pericles, referring to him as ‘‘protos aner,’’ the first man, suggesting that Athens was a democracy in name only. Among the Athenians, he was referred to as the ‘‘Olympian’’ because of the air of loftiness and high-mindedness he consistently projected. Given the tenor of Athenian politics, particularly the unforgiving and volatile nature of public opinion, it is extraordinary that Pericles dominated the political and military horizons as he did.

In carrying off Pericles, the plague deprived Athens of the one man who had the courage and capacity to criticize the citizenry when necessary.

Unlike other public figures, particularly those who followed, Pericles did not pander to the people; where the others flattered, he alone dared to speak

the truth. Pericles challenged his people with a vision of ‘‘great politics,’’ a vision immortalized in the famous Funeral Oration, which continues to provide some of the most compelling evidence of Pericles’ status as a true statesman. An unbroken chain of **demagogues** filled the void created by Pericles’ death and in so doing ensured Athens’ ruin.

In addition to depriving Athens of its greatest leader, the plague was also responsible for a profound social deterioration that had far-reaching consequences for Athens and for Greece. The great pestilence of 430 BC had a sociopolitical consequences. The first infestation despoiled human flesh. The second infestation devastated the system of norms and values necessary for civilized life. Thucydides refers to this deterioration in his analysis of the plague’s impact. The imminent specter of death projected by

the plague unleashed an anarchic [chaotic] spirit that consumed the entire city. People began to live for the moment, disregarding all laws, sacred and profane. Time honored customs and social restraints were cast aside with the result that the golden age rapidly was reduced to a **state of nature**. The plague fostered an environment that unraveled the spiritual tapestry of Greece’s greatest city. The high idealism and lofty aspirations that are articulated eloquently in the Funeral Oration were trampled underfoot by individuals who experienced the plague’s bitter effects. In this regard, one could argue that the mindless gore of **Melos** had its origins with the plague, which conditioned the Athenians to the horrible cheapness of human life.

Summary

Disease as a pivotal factor in determining the course of human events may be one of the least considered historical variables. When assessing the critical junctures of history, historians seem more inclined to focus on the

impact of conquering armies, economic revolutions, and technologic breakthroughs. This analysis attempts to illustrate the seminal effects of the great plague of Athens. By depleting Athenian military personnel,

depriving Athens of its charismatic leadership, and dissolving the system of ideals and principles that distinguished Athens from the rest of antiquity,

the plague materially altered the outcome of the Peloponnesian War, which in turn deflected the flow of all subsequent Hellenic history.

Perhaps the best way to fully appreciate the weight of the plague’s significance is to consider the following questions: How might the history of Athens and Greece have been different had the deft hand of Pericles remained in place? What would have been the effects on world history had Athens achieved victory in the Peloponnesian War? How might Western civilization

have benefited from an extended Golden Age led by an Athens that was unscathed by protracted warfare? Only by considering the plague from these vantage points can one begin to appreciate the disease’s full implication for

Greece and for the subsequent development of Western culture.

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