

PRIMARY SOURCE **Plague in Athens**
by Thucydides

Section 3 *Thucydides, an Athenian historian, fought in the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. After being exiled by the Athenians following a particularly costly defeat, Thucydides spent the next 20 years writing a history of the war. This excerpt from his History describes an outbreak of an unidentified disease that caused a deadly plague in Athens in 430 B.C., at the height of the war.*

The disease began, it is said, in Ethiopia beyond Egypt, and then descended into Egypt and Libya and spread over the greater part of the King's territory. Then it suddenly fell upon the city of Athens, and attacked first the inhabitants of the Peiraeus . . . I shall describe its actual course, explaining the symptoms, from the study of which a person should be best able, having knowledge of it beforehand, to recognize it if it should ever break out again. For I had the disease myself and saw others sick of it.

That year, as was agreed by all, happened to be unusually free from disease so far as regards the other maladies; but if anyone was already ill of any disease all terminated in this. In other cases from no obvious cause, but suddenly and while in good health, men were seized first with intense heat of the head, and redness and inflammation of the eyes, and the parts inside the mouth, both the throat and the tongue, immediately became blood-red and exhaled an unnatural and fetid breath. In the next stage sneezing and hoarseness came on, and in a short time the disorder descended to the chest, attended by severe coughing. And when it settled in the stomach, that was upset, and vomits of bile of every kind named by physicians ensued, these also attended by great distress; and in most cases ineffectual retching followed producing violent convulsions, which sometimes abated [lessened] directly, sometimes not until long afterwards. . . . They were also beset by restlessness and sleeplessness which never abated. And the body was not wasted while the disease was at its height, but resisted surprisingly the ravages of the disease, so that when the patients died, as most of them did on the seventh or ninth day from the internal heat, they still had some strength left; or, if they passed the crisis, the disease went down into the bowels, producing there a violent ulceration, and at the same time an acute diarrhoea set in, so that in this

later stage most of them perished through weakness caused by it. . . . And the most dreadful thing about the whole malady was not only the despondency of the victims, when they once became aware that they were sick, for their minds straightway yielded to despair and they gave themselves up for lost instead of resisting, but also the fact that they became infected by nursing one another and died like sheep. . . . Bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead people rolled about in the streets and, in their longing for water, near all the fountains. The temples, too, in which they had quartered themselves were full of the corpses of those who had died in them; for the calamity which weighed upon them was so overpowering that men, not knowing what was to become of them, became careless of all law, sacred as well as profane. . . . And many resorted to shameless modes of burial because so many members of their households had already died that they lacked the proper funeral materials. Resorting to other people's pyres, some, anticipating those who had raised them, would put on their own dead and kindle the fire; others would throw the body they were carrying upon one which was already burning and go away.

from C.F. Smith, trans., *History* by Thucydides (Loeb, 1919). Reprinted in John Carey, ed., *Eyewitness to History* (New York: Avon, 1987), 1–2.

Activity Options

1. **Summarizing** Imagine that you have been asked to prepare a health bulletin to inform Athenians about this deadly disease. List possible symptoms in the order in which they occur.
2. **Making Generalizations** Invite a physician or another health professional in your community to speak to the class about possible causes of this disease and how Athenians might have prevented its spread.