THE PLAGUE AT SYRACUSE: 396 B.C.

BY

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In 396 B.C. the Carthaginians besieged Syracuse\(^1\). Diodorus (14, 70, 4) records that a plague struck the army of Carthage with such devastating effects that Dionysius of Syracuse was able to lead an attack against the weakened Carthaginians and decisively defeat them. Diodorus' account is the only extant one that describes this plague. While the communis opinio has generally been that the disease is smallpox, there has not been a systematic analysis of the symptoms. It is the purpose of this paper to (1) suggest that this plague was part of the same epidemic that struck Athens 430-427 B.C. and (2) analyse the symptoms and confirm the identity of the disease.

Highly contagious plagues do not strike a single city at a single time and then disappear. The normal life span for an epidemic is 30 to 40 years. In the first attack a majority of the population would be infected. Those that survived would develop a total or limited immunity, depending on the disease. However, within a few years, new children would be born who did not have that immunity. Also some of those who might not have contracted the disease in the first outbreak might catch the disease in the second. For example, our records are particularly good for smallpox during the eighteenth century in Mexico. Severe outbreaks occurred in 1761, 1779/80, 1797/98, with a declining mortality rate with each outbreak\(^2\).

Another example of the 'life-span' of a plague (most likely smallpox) can be seen in the Antonine plague which struck the Roman empire in the second century A.D.\(^3\). This epidemic began

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1) A version of this paper was presented at the 1979 annual meeting of the American Philological Association (Society for Ancient Medicine) in Boston.
2) See D. B. Cooper, Epidemic Disease in Mexico City 1761-1813 (Austin 1965), 68 ff. See also F. Prinzing, Epidemics Resulting from Wars (Oxford 1916), 222.
at the end of 165 A.D. in Mesopotamia and spread to Rome within the year. The plague lasted at least until the reign of Marcus Aurelius in 180 A.D., with another probable outbreak in 189 A.D. Whether the highly contagious plague disease was smallpox, typhus, or some like disease, we would expect a similar pattern. If we examine the Athenian plague, we find gaps in our information. While I have argued elsewhere that the plague at Athens was smallpox4), whatever one identifies the disease as, it would be normal to expect a 30 to 40 year life span of the plague, with each major outbreak being less severe.

We learn from Thucydides (II 48) that the plague struck Athens in summer 430 and lasted for two years. The disease had first begun in Ethiopia, came into Egypt and Libya, and spread over much of Persia and to the Greek island of Lemnos before coming to Athens. After a devastating period of two years, there was a respite, and then in 427 B.C. the plague broke out again, and this time lasted over a year (Thuc. III 87). In the period 430-428 B.C. the plague was not serious in the Peloponnese (Thuc. II 44, 5). However, Thucydides implies that cities other than Athens were attacked when he says (II 44, 5) that Athens was most affected, as were places that had the densest population. In the same summer (Thuc. II 58), the Athenian fleet under Hagnon sailed to aid the siege of Potidæa. It brought the plague with it, and even the soldiers of the first expedition became infected.

After these two outbreaks of the plague in 430-428 and in 427 B.C., Thucydides makes no further mention of the plague. Given our knowledge of patterns of plagues, it would be extremely