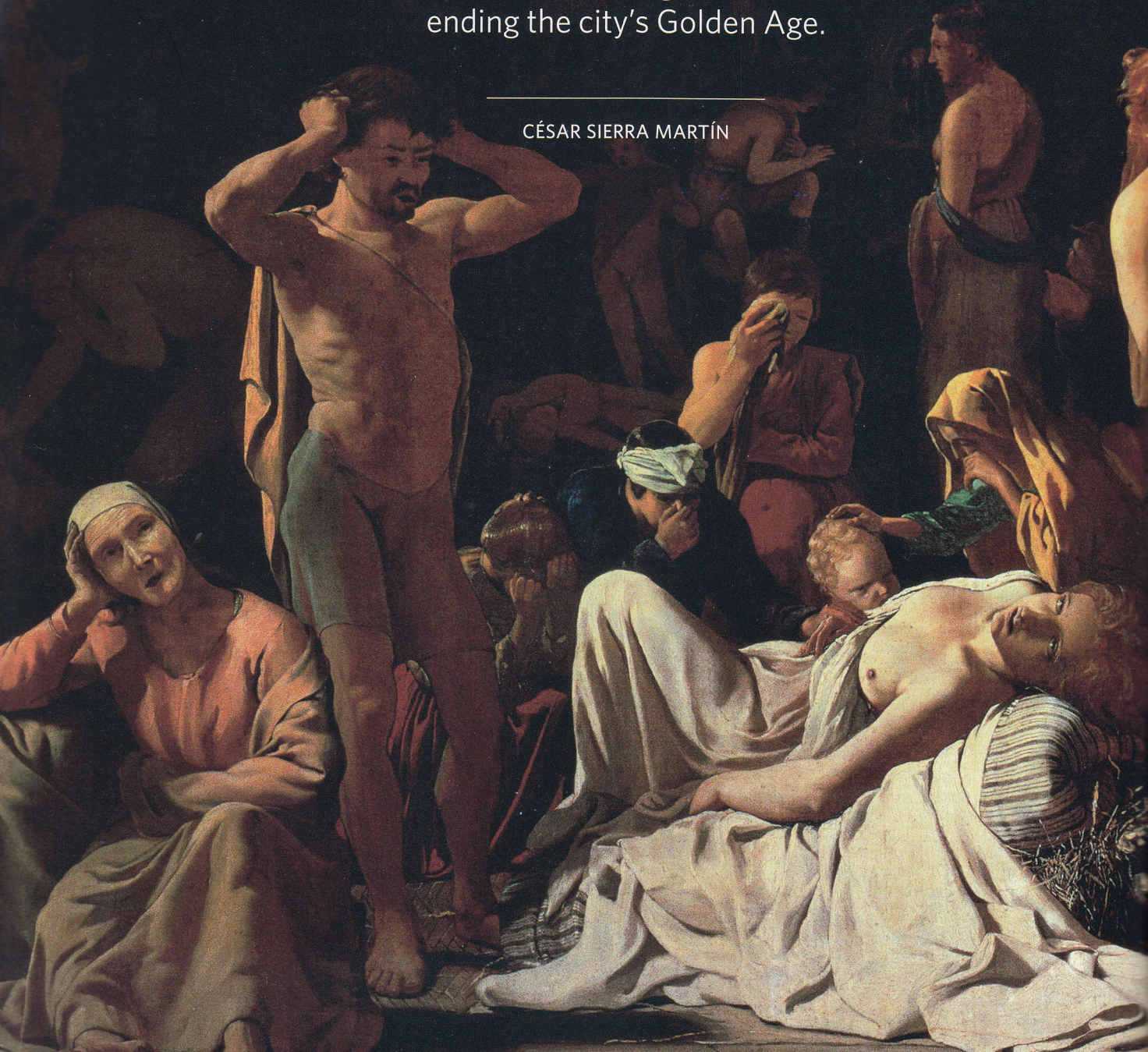


War and Pestilence

THE PLAGUE OF ATHENS

In the second year of the Peloponnesian War, an epidemic ripped through Athens, killing tens of thousands and ending the city's Golden Age.

CÉSAR SIERRA MARTÍN





PLAGUE IN ANTIQUITY

This oil painting (ca 1652) by Michael Sweerts is called "Plague in an Ancient City," and some scholars interpret it as a depiction of the Athenian plague that broke out in 430 b.c. Others, however, think it is a more general representation.

CHRISTIE'S IMAGES/SCALA, FLORENCE



ATHENS VS. SPARTA

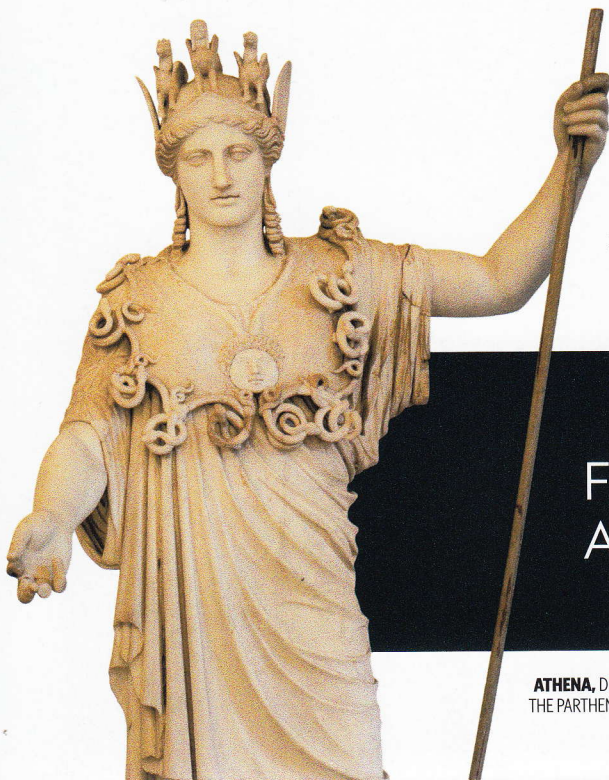
The Peloponnesian War broke out in 431 B.C. Despite the devastation caused by the plague, the war lasted for more than 25 years.

NG MAPS

Two of the most powerful city-states in ancient Greece—Sparta and Athens—went to war in 431 B.C. Tensions between the two had been simmering for decades before boiling over into war. Occupying the lands of the Peloponnese (mainland Greece’s southernmost peninsula), Sparta enacted a land-based strategy, relying on their disciplined hoplites to defeat the Athenians in the open field. When Spartan troops would invade Attica (the peninsula where Athens and its allies were located),

Athenians responded with naval attacks on politically sensitive points in the Peloponnese. Rural populations in Attica would be forced to take refuge within Athens’s city walls when Sparta invaded.

The Peloponnesian War would end by fundamentally shifting power in the Mediterranean, but neither Athens’s navy nor Sparta’s soldiers could claim to be the determining factor of the conflict. That honor belongs to an event that nobody could have predicted or planned for: the plague of Athens, which broke out in the war’s second year. A medical mystery to this day, this ancient epidemic would be the most influential factor to shape the war and decide which city-state would be the final victor.



FATE OF ATHENS

431 B.C.

The Peloponnesian War breaks out between the powerful city-states of Athens and Sparta, and their allies.

430 B.C.

In the second year of war, a mysterious sickness begins to spread among Athenians. It quickly reaches epidemic proportions.



SACRED PERCH

Dedicated to Athena, patron goddess of Athens, the Parthenon overlooks the city from its perch on the Acropolis. The temple was finished in 432 B.C., shortly before the start of the Peloponnesian War.

HERMES IMAGES/AGE FOTOSTOCK

429 B.C.

The plague continues to rage, and the Athenian leader Pericles and members of his family are infected. He dies that fall.

426 B.C.

The epidemic's final wave breaks out in Athens. After nearly five years, up to a third of Athens's population has died because of the plague.

CA 421 B.C.

Athens and Sparta strike a truce. Neither side is satisfied by the agreement, and hostilities will break out again in 418.

404 B.C.

The Peloponnesian War ends. Thucydides' account of the conflict contains the most detailed historical record of the plague of Athens.

The Horrors of the Plague

THUCYDIDES not only left behind a gift in his descriptions of the plague's physical symptoms; he also recorded the psychological impact the epidemic had in Athens:

The most terrifying aspect of the whole affliction was the despair which resulted when someone realized that he had the disease: people immediately lost hope, and so through their attitude of mind were much more likely to let themselves go and not hold out . . . [T]he disaster was overpowering, and as people did not know what would become of them, they tended to neglect the sacred and the secular alike. All the funeral customs which had previously been observed were thrown into confusion and the dead were buried in any way possible.



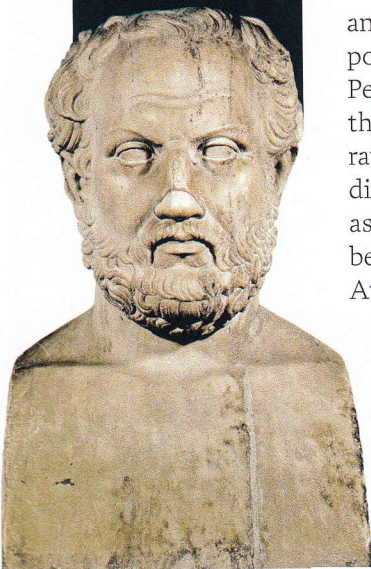
THIS FUNERARY STELA OF THE ATHENIAN WOMAN HEGESO DATES TO ABOUT 450 B.C., TWO DECADES BEFORE THE OUTBREAK OF THE DEVASTATING PLAGUE THAT DISRUPTED FUNERARY RITES IN ATHENS. NATIONAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, ATHENS

SCALA, FLORENCE

PLAGUE SURVIVOR

Greek writer Thucydides wrote his *History of the Peloponnesian War* after surviving the plague. Second-century A.D. Roman bust (copy of Greek original). National Archaeological Museum, Naples

ORONOZ/ALBUM



Outbreak

In spring 430 B.C. locals in Piraeus, the port area of Athens, began to fall ill with a disease no one had seen before. The malady spread quickly. Reports circulated of similar outbreaks on the island of Lemnos, in the north Aegean, and other locations.

In Piraeus, rumors spread that when the Spartans had arrived they had poisoned the wells there so that Athenians were sickened by drinking contaminated water. In a matter of weeks, the disease had spread to the heart of the city and was affecting people of all ages and backgrounds and in unprecedented proportions. The strategy of the Athenian leader Pericles to bring people from rural Attica into the walled city of Athens, only increased the rate of contagion. The illness, whatever it was, did not affect the Spartans to the same degree as the Athenians. In total, it is estimated that between 25 and 35 percent of the population of Athens would perish as a result of the plague when it ended five years later.

The main source of information about the epidemic comes from the historian Thucydides, who not only witnessed the

events firsthand but survived the disease himself. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides believes the plague originated in eastern Africa, in the lands of ancient Ethiopia (present-day Sudan). From there, the sickness traveled north to Egypt and Libya and east to the Persian Empire before reaching Greece.

Early in his account, Thucydides writes: "I shall give a statement of what it was like, which people can study in case it should ever attack again." His descriptions chart how the disease progressed in its victims, from the first symptoms: "[P]eople in good health were all of a sudden attacked by heats in the head, and redness and inflammation in the eyes, the inward parts, such as the throat or tongue, becoming bloody and emitting an unnatural and fetid breath." Symptoms included "sneezing and hoarseness" before the disease attacked the chest, causing "a hard cough," and then the stomach, where it triggered "discharges of bile," "ineffectual retching," and "violent spasms." By this point the victim was in "very great distress."

Thucydides describes the appearance of the patient's skin: "reddish, livid, and breaking out into small pustules and ulcers." Sufferers

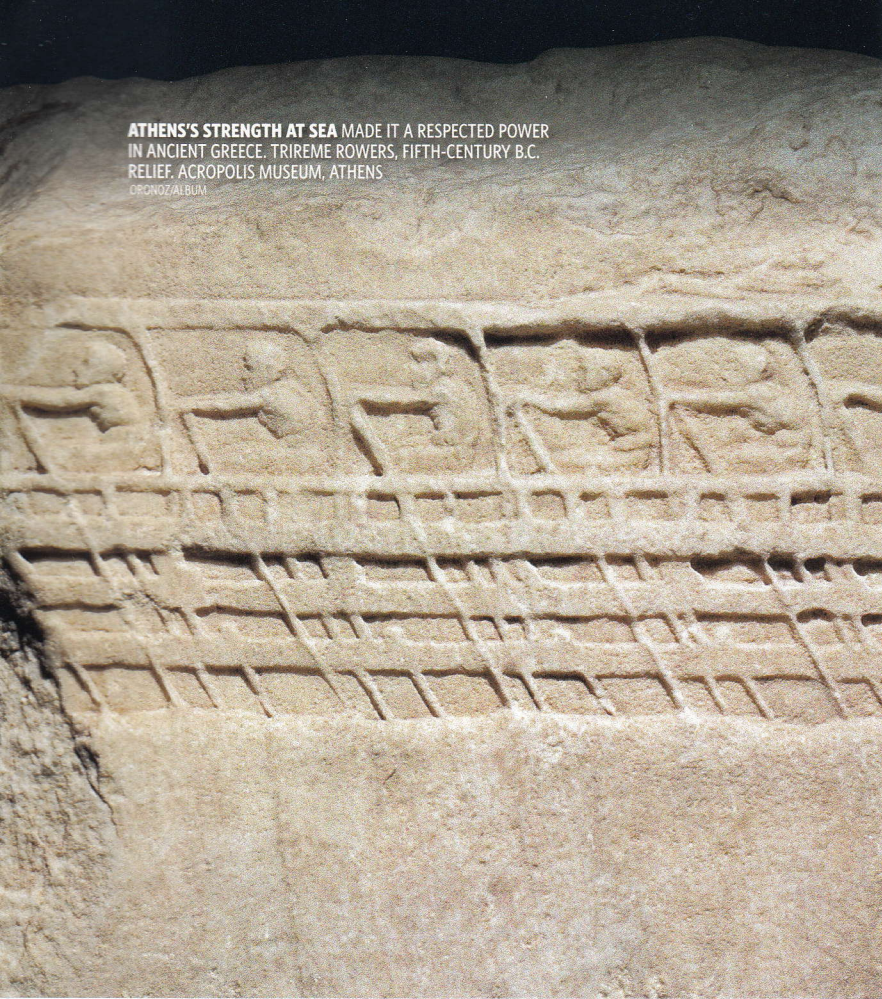
CONSTRUCTION DELAYS

The Temple of Hephaestus was a pet project of Pericles. Building began around 450 B.C., but it would be more than 30 years before completion—partly due to the disruption of the Peloponnesian War.

ALAMY/ACI



ATHENS'S STRENGTH AT SEA MADE IT A RESPECTED POWER IN ANCIENT GREECE. TRIREME ROWERS, FIFTH-CENTURY B.C. RELIEF, ACROPOLIS MUSEUM, ATHENS
©CRNOZALBUN



described intense fevers, feeling as though a fire was consuming them inside, so they would remove all their clothes. They experienced an “unquenchable thirst,” which led some to plunge themselves into water tanks as well. Extreme insomnia followed.

Treating the Sick

Thucydides reports that many patients died within seven to nine days of being infected. If they made it through the first stage, they might then suffer severe ulceration of the bowels accompanied by diarrhea; the ensuing weakness generally proved fatal. The main problems in treating the disease was its novelty and its contagiousness. Doctors had never experienced anything quite like it, leaving their expertise

powerless against the epidemic. “No remedy was found that could be used as a specific,” writes Thucydides, “for what did good in one case, did harm in another.” Regardless of the treatment given, he writes, “strong and weak constitutions proved equally incapable of resistance, all alike being swept away.”

The contagious disease took a toll on those who cared for the sick. Physicians were badly hit early on. Indeed, anyone who nursed their sick loved ones paid a high price: “[I]f they ventured to do so, death was the consequence.” If they did not, the patients “perished from neglect; indeed many houses were emptied of their inmates for want of a nurse.” Thucydides notes that “it was with those who had recovered from the disease that the sick and the dying found most compassion. These knew what it was from experience.”

Infection seems to have brought with it some immunity: “The same man was never attacked twice—never at least fatally.” Those who had been infected but had come through might experience a brief, euphoric feeling that they could survive anything. Even so, the plague, whatever it was, could leave those who recovered with severe aftereffects. Some people were “seized with an entire loss of memory on their first recovery, and did not know either themselves or their friends.” Many survivors suffered lasting damage to their fingers and toes, genitals, and eyes.

As well as its impact on health, the epidemic caused radical disruption to everyday life for Athenians. According to Thucydides, “the bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets.” Corpses piled up and, given the urgency of the situation, there was no time to perform even the most elementary rites when burying the dead. Several bodies would be cremated at the same time on the same pyre.

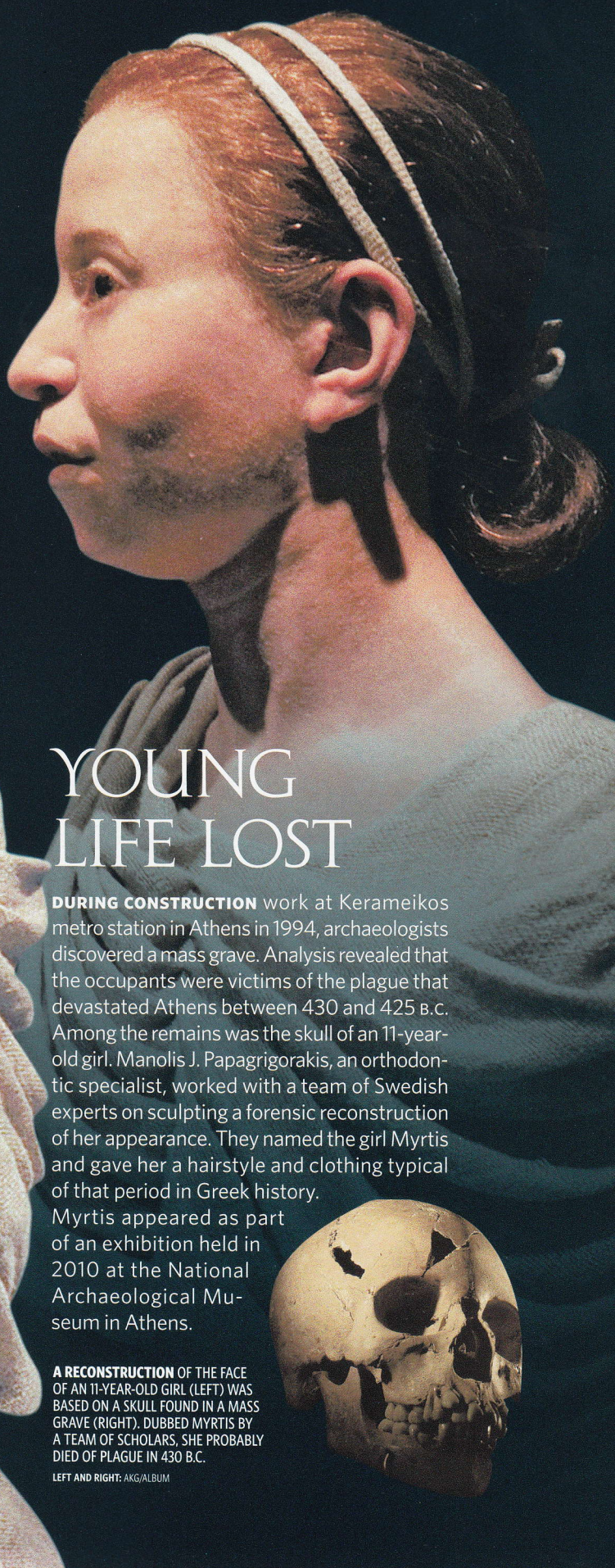
Civil Unrest

The plague had a radical effect on Athenian society. Traditional hierarchies were turned upside down: Wealthy citizens might see their livelihoods destroyed from one day to the next, while poor ones might get rich by appropriating a dead man’s assets. Thucydides describes how moral conventions were abandoned and people tended to live each day as if it were their last: “[A]s the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane.” Nobody feared justice, as death by



Thucydides wrote of the belief that Spartans caused the plague by poisoning wells.

SPARTAN WARRIOR, BRONZE FIGURINE, SIXTH CENTURY B.C.
BRIDGEMAN/ACI

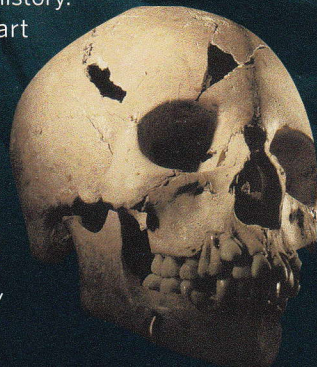


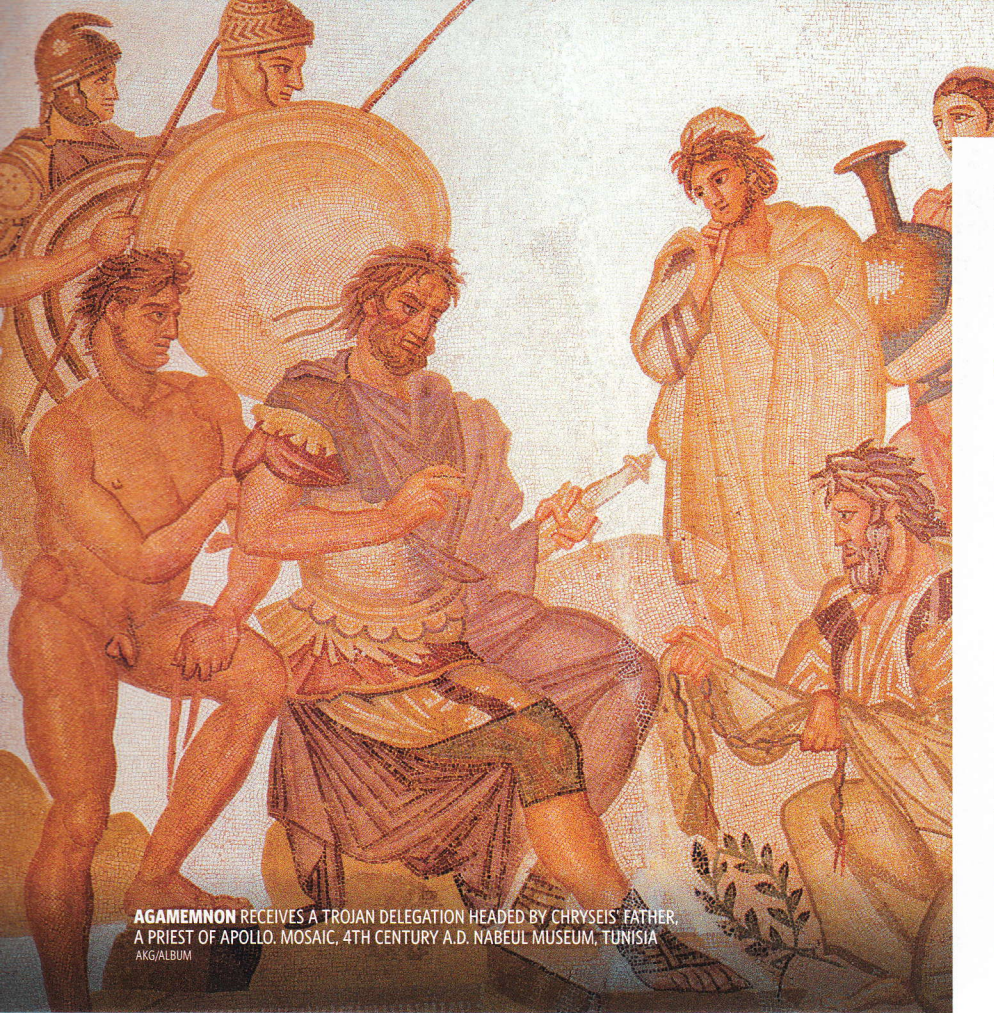
YOUNG LIFE LOST

DURING CONSTRUCTION work at Kerameikos metro station in Athens in 1994, archaeologists discovered a mass grave. Analysis revealed that the occupants were victims of the plague that devastated Athens between 430 and 425 B.C. Among the remains was the skull of an 11-year-old girl. Manolis J. Papagrigrakis, an orthodontic specialist, worked with a team of Swedish experts on sculpting a forensic reconstruction of her appearance. They named the girl Myrtis and gave her a hairstyle and clothing typical of that period in Greek history. Myrtis appeared as part of an exhibition held in 2010 at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens.

A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE FACE OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD GIRL (LEFT) WAS BASED ON A SKULL FOUND IN A MASS GRAVE (RIGHT), DUBBED MYRTIS BY A TEAM OF SCHOLARS, SHE PROBABLY DIED OF PLAGUE IN 430 B.C.

LEFT AND RIGHT: AKG/ALBUM





AGAMEMNON RECEIVES A TROJAN DELEGATION HEADED BY CHRYSEIS' FATHER, A PRIEST OF APOLLO. MOSAIC, 4TH CENTURY A.D. NABEUL MUSEUM, TUNISIA
AKG/ALBUM

Epic Ailments

HOMER'S EPIC WORK *The Iliad* begins with an epidemic that forces the Greek leaders besieging Troy to consider withdrawing their troops. They consult the soothsayer Calchas to find out the cause of the sickness. Calchas tells them the affliction has been sent by Apollo as punishment for an offense committed by Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks. Agamemnon has seized Chryseis, the daughter of a Trojan priest of Apollo, as a war prize and refuses to ransom her back to her father. To end the epidemic, Agamemnon reluctantly returns Chryseis but then takes Briseis, the war prize of Greek hero Achilles, as a replacement. Agamemnon's petty, short-sighted decision sends Achilles into a rage and sets in motion the great epic's dramatic events.

HEALING POWERS

This undated statue depicts the healing goddess Hygieia, whose cult grew during the plague of Athens.

WHA/ACI



plague seemed more imminent than any pending court case.

Spiritual concerns loomed large as well. Many believed something had angered the gods, who unleashed the disease as punishment. According to Thucydides, the elders spoke of an ancient oracle that had predicted a great epidemic would ensue after a "Dorian war"; the Spartans were Dorians, descendants of an ancient people who had settled in the Peloponnese. It was also rumored that the Spartans had consulted the oracle at Delphi about the outcome of the war; through prophecy, the god Apollo had promised his support to Sparta. The Athenians themselves sought counsel of the gods and sent emissaries to Delphi and other sanctuaries for divine guidance on the epidemic.

Overwhelmed by the impact of the plague on their loved ones and on their way of life, Athenians began to turn against their leader, Pericles. While the move may have seemed practical at the time, with hindsight, his war strategy of encouraging the population to shelter from Sparta's attacks within Athens's city walls had worsened the sanitary conditions in the city. As Thucydides records:

An aggravation of the existing calamity was the influx from the country into the city, and this was especially felt by the new arrivals. As there were no houses to receive them, they had to be lodged at the hot season of the year in stifling cabins, where the mortality raged without restraint.

Pericles' political rivals went further, accusing him of calling down the misfortune upon them through his determined support for the war. After more than a decade of often adoring support, Athens turned against Pericles: A heavy fine was levied against him, and he was not reelected as official strategist.

Having been thrown out of office for mishandling the epidemic, Pericles would then suffer the ravages of the disease firsthand. According to the historian Plutarch, Pericles' eldest son, Xanthippus, who had a rocky relationship with his father, succumbed to the plague, as did Pericles' sister shortly after. His second son, Paralus, also fell ill and died, a tragedy that ended up breaking the legendary self-control of Pericles, who died from the plague himself in fall 429 B.C.

DIVINE WISDOM

As an epidemic ravaged the city, Athens looked to the gods for help and sent delegations to the oracle in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. The colonnade standing at the site today dates to the fourth century B.C.

JESSE PEET/GETTY IMAGES

