

ATHENS AND ROME: LIFE AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Lecture 23 – Death and Disease in
the Greek World

CLCS4007

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Evidence

- ❑ Literary descriptions – incidental comments or reports on major outbreaks of disease, e.g. Thucydides and plague at Athens.
- ❑ Medical texts – Hippocratic corpus.
- ❑ Archaeological evidence – particularly the study of bones.
- ❑ Epigraphic evidence – funerary inscriptions.
- ❑ Comparative studies of later periods.
 - lack of detailed statistical evidence for ancient Athens.

Funerary Practices in Ancient Athens

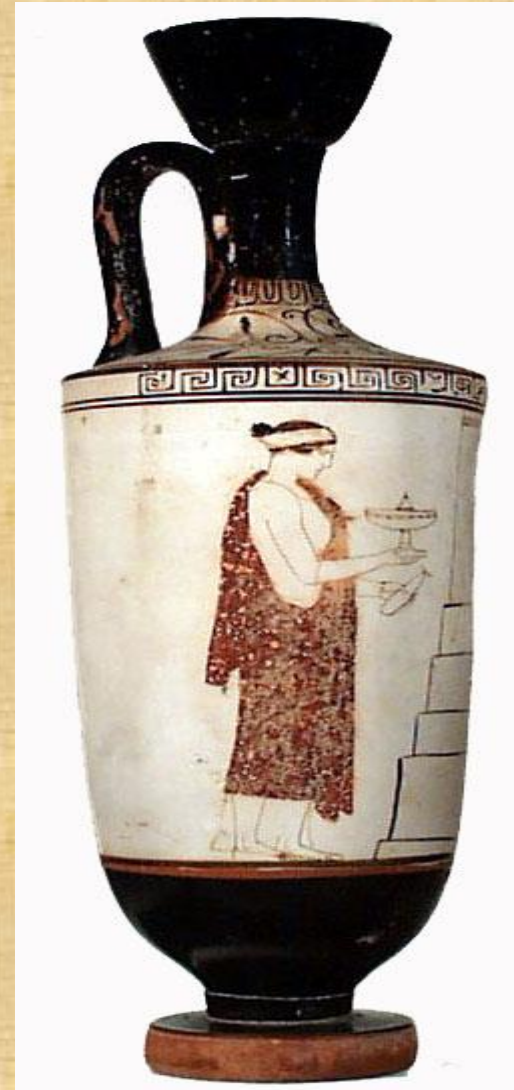
Funerary Ritual

- ▣ Three main elements to funerary ritual in Classical Athens: the *prothesis* (lying in state), the *ekphora* (procession to the grave) and the interment in the grave.
- ▣ For the *prothesis* the eyes and mouth of deceased were closed, and the body was washed, anointed with oil and perfume, and clothed. Placing coins in the mouth started to happen in late fifth century BC, but not common till Hellenistic period. The body was rapped in a shroud and placed on a bier (couch or bed).
- ▣ During the *prothesis* the women stood around the bier mourning and singing ritualised laments. Men often stayed off to the side, giving the ritual farewell with raised arm (valediction).

- ❑ Before dawn on the third day the *ekphora* to the graveyard took place. Men walked in front, women behind. The corps was borne either by cart or by pallbearers. Flutists might accompany the procession.
- ❑ After arrival at grave, the corps was either placed in grave or near to it. A ceremony of sowing the earth with it produce and pouring libations took place, possible after a sacrifice.
- ❑ In case of cremation, pyre put out and bones and ashes placed in a funerary urn. Offering were placed in and on the grave.
- ❑ A *perideipnon* (a funerary banquet) took place after the funeral. Commemoration of dead on anniversary; also the *Genesia* (a yearly public festival for the dead).

Lekythoi

- ▣ *Lekythos* is which contains oil or scented unguents which are brought to the dead.
- ▣ Extremely common grave good in Athens between c.560 to the end of the fifth century BC.



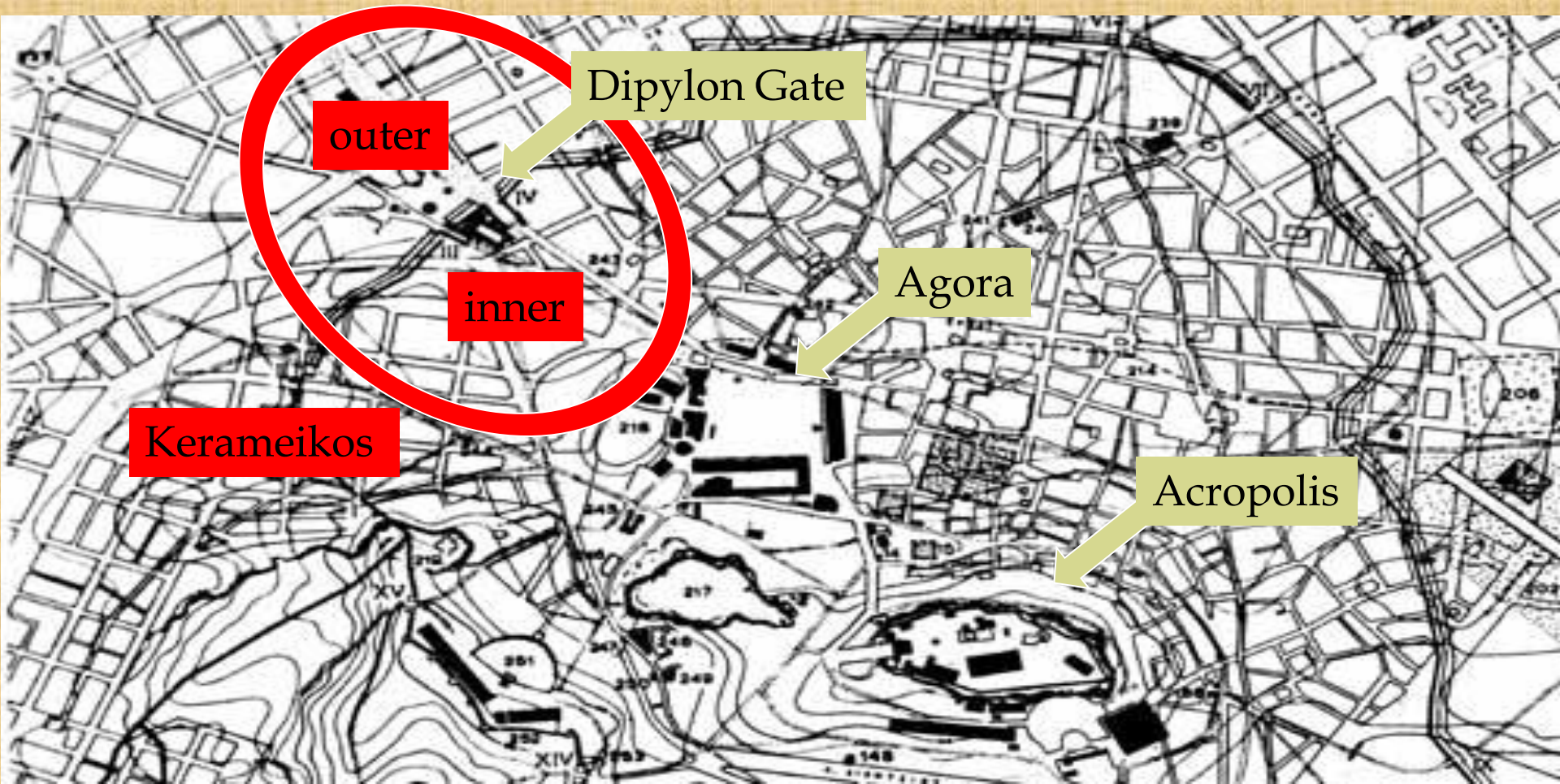
Tending to the Deceased

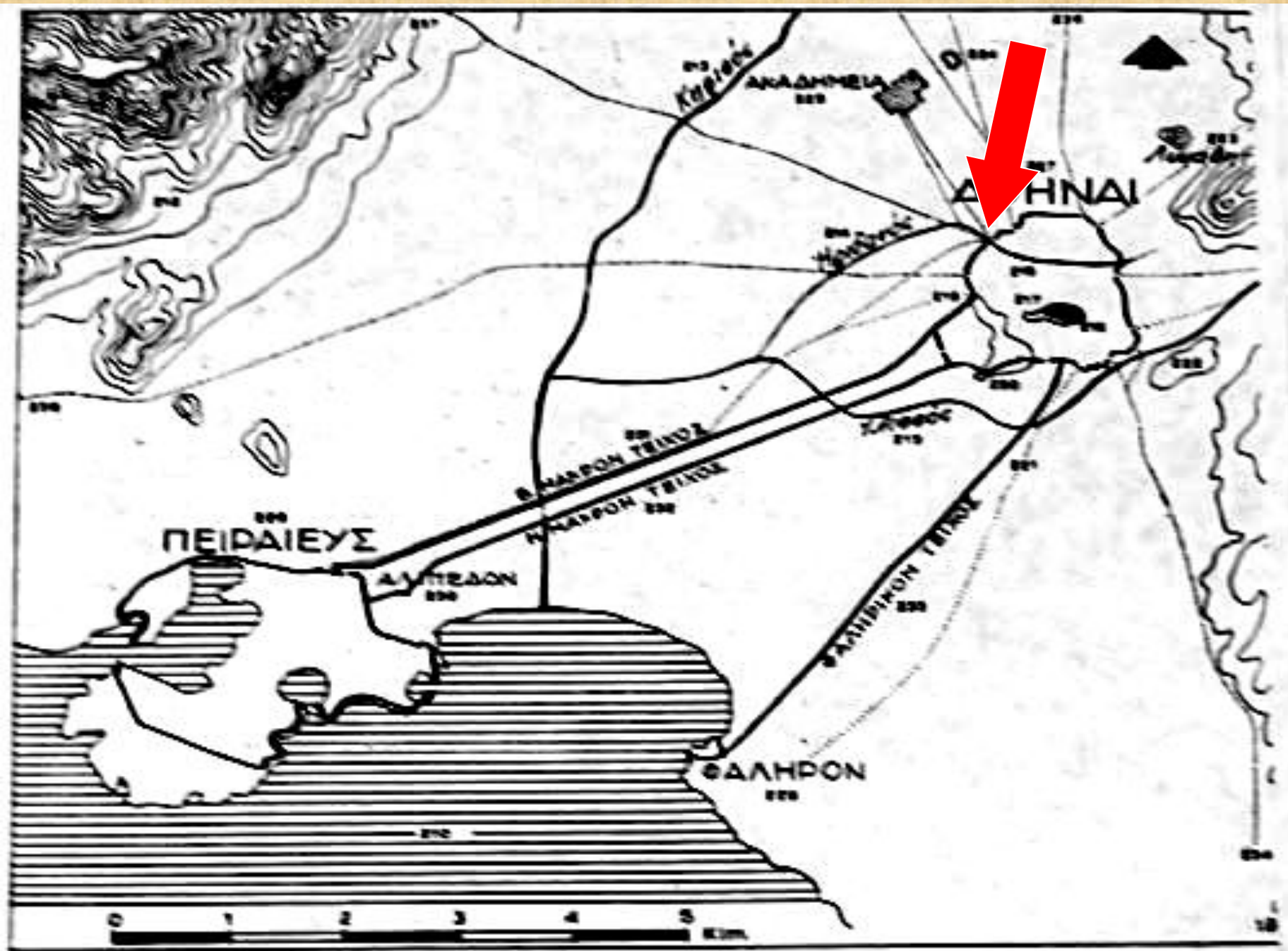
- ▣ Attending to the graves is a crucial duty of women.
- ▣ Women would look after the monuments and leave grave goods.
- ▣ Ribbons tied around the stele, *lekythoi* and other vessels deposited by the grave.

“I shall descend, even before the fated term of my life is spent. But I cherish strong hopes that I will arrive welcome to my father, and pleasant to you, Mother, and welcome, dear brother, to you. For, when each of you died, with my own hands I washed and dressed you and poured drink-offerings at your graves. But now, Polyneices, it is for tending your corpse that I win such reward as this. And yet I honoured you rightly, as the wise understand.” – **Sophocles**
Antigone lines 896-900.

Grave Sites

- Athenians buried the dead outside the city; the main cemetery was in the Kerameikos, outside the Dipylon and sacred gate.





Kerameikos Cemetery

- ❑ Kerameikos served both private and public (e.g. war dead) funerals.
- ❑ Site had been in use since c. late 11th century BC.
- ❑ Some of the old cemetery destroyed and the monuments built into new walls.



Public Burials

“In the same winter the Athenians, following annual tradition, gave a funeral at the public cost to those who had first fallen in this war.” – **Thucydides 2.34.1.**

- ▣ Two days before ceremony, bones are laid out in tents so family and friends can bring offerings (2.34.2).
- ▣ In funeral procession bones placed in cypress coffin of the tribe, one symbolic empty coffin (2.34.3).
- ▣ Anyone can join the procession and female relatives there to wail at burial (2.34.4).
- ▣ Dead are laid in public sepulchre in the most beautiful suburb of the city. After bodies are laid in the earth, a man of eminence is chosen to give public panegyric for the dead (2.34.5-6).

Private Burials

- ▣ The ancient Athenians practiced cremation and inhumation . Bodies buried in simple stone sarcophagi, behind/beneath the grave stele or monument.
- ▣ “Stelae” (or stelai) worked slabs of stone which may have inscriptions or reliefs.



Comprehending Disease

Causes of Disease

- ▣ Pathogens – viruses, bacteria, and protozoans.
- ▣ Parasites (e.g. worms).
- ▣ Distinct from medical conditions that are metabolic, dietary or degenerative in origin.
- ▣ Endemic (continually present within a population) Vs epidemic (spreading suddenly and widely, affecting large numbers).
- ▣ Disease more easily spread by concentration of human and animal populations.

Greek Notions of Disease

“The arrows rattled of the shaft of the angry god [Apollo]... and shot them down and continually the pyres of the dead burned thickly. For nine days the missiles of the god ranged throughout...” – *Iliad* 1.46-52.

“ This Art [medicine], however, has been cultivated among the Greeks much more than in other nations — not, however, even among them from their first beginnings, but only for a few generations before ours...From the same authority [Homer], indeed, it can be learned that diseases were then ascribed to the anger of the immortal gods...” – **Celsus** *De Medicina* Prooemium 2, 4.

- ❑ In the Hippocratic corpus disease is connected with environment and seasons, but not specifically with concentrated urban living.
- ❑ By fifth century, notions of “disease” (at least in a metaphorical sense, springing up from the city develop (*stasis* as disease).

“The crowding of the people out of the country into the city aggravated the misery; and the newly-arrived suffered most. For, having no houses of their own, but inhabiting in the height of summer stifling huts, the mortality among them was dreadful, and they perished in wild disorder.” - **Thucydides 2.52.1.**

- ❑ Both Diodorus Siculus (12.45.2) and Plutarch (*Pericles* 34) note the belief that bad air was a contributory cause, not just an exacerbating factor of the disease (note lateness of sources).

“For a while physicians, in ignorance of the nature of the disease, sought to apply remedies; but it was in vain, and they themselves were among the first victims, because they oftenest came into contact with it.” – **Thucydides 2.47.2.**

“Appalling too was the rapidity with which men caught the infection; dying like sheep if they attended on one another; and this was the principal cause of mortality. When they were afraid to visit one another, the sufferers died in their solitude, so that many houses were empty because there had been no one left to take care of the sick; or if they ventured they perished, especially those who aspired to heroism. For they went to see their friends without thought of themselves and were ashamed to leave them, at a time when the very relations of the dying...” – **(2.51).**

Plague in Athens

Outbreak and Symptoms

- During the summer of 430 BC a plague broke out in Athens (where it was most virulent), and elsewhere like Lemnos and densely populated towns – **Thuc. 2.47.**
- Thucydides (2.48) reports the belief that it had originated in Ethiopia, and spread into Egypt, Libya and the territory of the Persian Empire.
- Thucydides (2.49) description of the symptoms: Initial burning feeling in the head, with reddened and inflamed eyes, bleeding from the throat and tongue, and putrid breath. This was followed by sneezing and hoarseness of voice, and pain in the chest and coughing.

- ▣ Next were stomach aches and vomiting of bile, in immense pain, retching and violent spasms.
- ▣ Externally the body was not very hot to touch, but the skin was reddish and livid, breaking out into small pustules and ulcers. Internal feeling of burning.
- ▣ Constant feeling of thirst and insomnia.
- ▣ Death if it came, was often on the seventh or eighth day. If people survived this period, they were effected by violent diarrhoea (death sometimes followed due to weakness induced by this).
- ▣ Scars left on the survivors, and sometimes loss of use of limbs on severely effected parts.
- ▣ Surviving the disease caused immunity from catching it again.

Identifying the Disease

- ▣ Attempts to compare clinical features recorded by Thucydides to those of contemporary diseases.
- ▣ Use of mathematical models of how epidemic disease behave in populations – comparisons of persons (who were affected), place (where) and time.
- ▣ Moren and Littman (1992), suggest typhus or small-pox are likely candidates.

Disposing of the Dead

“All the funeral ceremonies which used to be observed were now disorganised, and they buried the dead as best they could. Many people... used the most shameless methods. They would arrive first at a funeral pyre that had been made by others, put there own dead upon it and set it alight; or finding another pyre burning, they would throw the corpse that they were carrying on top of the other one and go away.” – **Thucydides 2.52.**

Mass Graves of Plague Victims



Reaction to the Plague

- ▣ Little evidence to show much in the way of public measures taken to combat the disease, no suggestion of quarantining or evacuation.
- ▣ Increase in lawlessness and hedonism during the plague – “There were other and worse forms of lawlessness which the plague introduced at Athens. Men who had hitherto concealed what they took pleasure in, now grew bolder. For, seeing the sudden change, how the rich died in a moment, and those who had nothing immediately inherited their property, they reflected that life and riches were alike transitory, and they resolved to enjoy themselves while they could, and to think only of pleasure...No fear of Gods or law of man deterred a criminal... For offences against human law no punishment was to be feared; no one would live long enough to be called to account.” - **Thucydides 2.53.**

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