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THE SMINTHIAN APOLLO AND THE EPIDEMIC AMONG THE ACHAEANS AT TROY

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Although the Hippocratic writings give meticulous symptoms of a number of diseases, Greek classical literature which contains numerous references to plagues and pestilences does not, with two exceptions, describe them in sufficient detail for identification. The well-known exception is the description by Thucydides (2.49) of the Athenian pestilence during the Peloponnesian War. The symptoms have been analyzed by a number of scholars who have arrived at a number of different diagnoses. The second exception is by Homer (*Il.* 1.50) who gives no symptoms of the pestilence which killed the Achaeans at Troy but states that the mules and dogs died before the men. The disease therefore cannot have been malaria, bubonic plague or typhus. Man is susceptible to all three but equines and dogs are not equally susceptible. The disease which is the best candidate for killing is equine encephalomyelitis which at the present time kills equines 7 to 14 days before symptoms appear in man. The death of dogs in modern epidemics is unusual but, experimentally, young dogs are susceptible.[1]

The Delphic Apollo sided with the Lacedemonians in the Peloponnesian War (Thuc. 1.118). Apollo Smintheus sided with the Trojans at Troy. He was invoked as Smintheus by his priest, Chryses. On both occasions a pestilence ensued.

Krappe[2] was the first to suggest that Apollo Smintheus was the god of

[1]The objection may be made that Homer included mules and dogs merely to emphasize the severity and terror of the epidemic. If this were so, there would be no need to mention the time interval between the death of the animals and the men. This time interval must have had an impact, for it remains when, because of the text's many vicissitudes, it might easily have been omitted since the simultaneous death of men and animals gives a more devastating impression.

[2]A. H. Krappe, *ARW* 33 (1936) 40.

bubonic plague and pointed out that there is an unequivocal association of bubonic plague with rodents in the Book of Samuel (1.5, 6). The epidemic started in the port of Ashdod where the Philistines were holding the Ark of the Covenant captured from the Jews. The Philistine priests ordered the return of the Ark to the Jews along with five golden tumors (buboes) and five golden mice. Sticker[3] dates this epidemic at about 1060 B.C.,[4] a little over 100 years after the fall of Troy. It is highly probable that the Minoans and Achaeans made the same association several hundred years earlier.

Ships carrying infected rodents disseminate the bubonic plague which usually originates in ports. Procopius (2.22.9) in describing the plague of Justinian in the sixth century A.D. explicitly states that it spread inland from the ports. All Sminthia mentioned by Homer and Strabo were on the islands or the coast. None has been found on the mainland.[5] It might be argued that if the cult of Smintheus originated in Crete and diffused eastward through the islands of the Troad, this would explain the distribution of the Sminthia. But why did it originate in the Crete of the seafaring Minoans rather than in the Greek mainland? and why a mouse cult? Sminthia at ports are strategically placed for worshippers to ask the god for protection against bubonic plague brought to them by the ships.

There can be little doubt therefore that Apollo Smintheus was the god of bubonic plague and possibly, by extension, the god of all severe pestilences, since the Achaeans probably did not correlate the symptoms of the epidemic with the species of animal which died prior to the death of men. Homer therefore would not be troubled by Chryses' invocation to a mouse god who thereupon killed dogs and mules.

The god who controls rodents can cause not only pestilence but starvation and defeat in battle as well. The control of the food supply is illustrated by a story by Aelian.[6] The Aeolians and Trojans were threatened by starvation because the mice were eating their crops. The god at Delphi was asked for help and he told them to sacrifice to Apollo Smintheus who thereupon reduced the mouse population.

Herodotus (2.141) describes the statue of the Pharaoh Sethos with a mouse in his hand which he states commemorates a victory for the Egyptians when mice gnawed the quivers and shield handles of

[3]G. Sticker, *Abhandlungen aus der Seuchen Geschichte und Seuchen Lehre* I (Giessen 1908) 17.

[4]In the *Oxford Annotated Bible*, H. G. May and B. M. Metzger, Eds., (Oxford 1962), footnote 1b 7.2 to I Sam. 4 gives the date about 1050 B.C. for this war between the Jews and the Philistines.

[5]L. R. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States* IV (Oxford 1907) 165.

[6]*NA* 12.5

Sennacharib's besieging army.[7] In the legend of Teucer (Strabo 12.1.48) mice ate the leather of the armor and prevented further conquest of the Troad. Teucer interpreted this as a sign from the god. Thus a mouse god has three ways of rewarding his worshippers or punishing his enemies.

Man early recognized the menace of rodents. In Vedic India, as pointed out by Krappe, Ganesha, the god of death, rode a rat. There are, however, a number of pestilences caused by Apollo where there are no references to rodents or other animals. These include the pestilence at Troy when Laomedon refused to pay him for his help in building the walls (Apollodorus 2.5.9); the pestilence along with thunder bolts and earthquakes he brought to the Phlegyans when they attacked Delphi (Pausanias 9.36.3); pestilence to the house of Amphion who mocked him (Pausanias 9.5.9); and to Athens during the Peloponnesian War.

In the epidemic at Troy rodents played no part. The arrows were the direct transmitter of the disease. Mosquitoes, as we now know, can transmit a number of diseases including equine encephalomyelitis. This disease was first proved to be infectious for man in 1939[8] and is caused by a virus which is harbored by a number of animals which show no overt symptoms.[9] But if an infected animal is bitten by a mosquito [10] the insect ingests the virus and transmits it to the next animal it bites. If that animal is susceptible the symptoms of encephalomyelitis appear.

[7]Sticker (above, note 3) states that bubonic plague struck Sennacharib's army and that Sethos lived seven hundred years before the battle was fought.

[8]*Epidemic Encephalitis, Third Matheson Report* (New York 1939) 21.

[9]F. L. Horsfall and I. Tamm, Eds., *Viral and Rickettial Infections in Man* (Toronto 1965[4]) 590.

[10]Since mosquitoes are the usual vectors for equine encephalomyelitis it is possible that the terrifying sound of Apollo's bow, κλαγγή (*Il.* 1.49), is a metaphor for the terrifying sound of myriads of mosquitoes. According to LSJ, κλαγγή is an unspecific word used for the barking of dogs, the cry of birds, the grunting of pigs, the hissing of serpents, etc. It is translated by A. T. Murray in his Loeb edition of Homer as "twang," a sound produced by vibration and closely related to "whine" which is usually of higher pitch than twang but produced by the same mechanism. The usual translations, "clang" and Lattimore's "clash," are not too felicitous since these words define sounds made only by contact of two or more objects. The κλαγγή, whine, of Smintheus' bow was terrifying probably because it was the signal for the outbreak of pestilence. As far as we have been able to ascertain, no emphasis is placed on the sound of the bow when Apollo is shooting his arrows for other lethal purposes.

It is also tempting to explain arrows as a metaphor for insects. Twice in the *Iliad* (1.51, 4.129) arrows are described as ἐχεπευκές. This is translated "stinging" by A. T. Murray. Smith and Miller, *The Iliad of Homer* (New York 1944), use "biting" and "bitter," and Lattimore uses "tearing" which seems singularly inappropriate for describing an arrow wound. Superficial arrow wounds could be equated with insect bites, as the whine of the bow with the whine of myriad mosquitoes. This does not imply that the Achaeans thought that mosquitoes were the cause of the disease. Insect vectors were only discovered at the end of the nineteenth

According to the map in Schliemann's book[11] two swamps are shown on the tributaries of the Simois about 700 meters from its junction with the Scamander. The swamps could be the breeding places of the mosquitoes, many species of which are vectors for the virus. There are at present several strains of virus producing somewhat different symptoms in man. Since Homer does not describe symptoms, it is not possible to determine whether the present day viruses differ from the ancient one. Contemporary viruses infect man, equines, certain ruminants and young dogs when injected into the blood stream. Adult dogs are infected only if the virus is injected into the brain. If the adult dogs of the Achaeans died, the ancient virus had the property of penetrating the brain from the blood stream, a property absent from modern viruses. Mutations often occur in viruses and this changes some of their characteristics. Occasionally another insect vector can transmit them. Equine encephalomyelitis, now endemic in the Near East, is caused by the so-called Borna strain which can be transmitted by ticks.[12] A man infected with eastern type virus (first isolated in the eastern United States) has a high fever, edema of the legs and face, convulsions, cyanosis, stiff neck and becomes comatose. Death occurs in 3-5 days. If the man recovers there are no sequelae. At the present time epidemics of equine encephalomyelitis are confined to the western hemisphere. The virus, however, has been isolated in many countries including Czechoslovakia and Russia.

Equine encephalomyelitis has no long history since the disease in equines and man was only recently correlated. It may or may not have been a disease of the ancient world. All that can be said is that the swamps and mosquitoes were probably present at Troy and that the prior death of equines is consistent with what we know at present about the epidemic characteristics of this disease.

century. The arrows of Smintheus caused the disease and the mosquitoes were its harbinger in the sense that dying rodents were considered harbingers of plague.

There is a tenuous association of insects and arrows in *Iliad* 4.129-31:

. . . βέλος ἐχεπευκὲς ἄμυνεν.
ἡ δὲ τόσον μὲν ἔεργεν ἀπὸ χροός, ὡς ὅτε μήτηρ
παιδὸς ἐέργῃ μυῖαν, ὅθ' ἡδεῖ λέξεται ὕπνῳ.

Athena protecting the wounded Menelaus "warded off the stinging arrow. She swept it aside from the flesh as a mother sweeps a fly from her child when he lies in sweet slumber."

The arrow is not, however, equated with the fly nor are flies necessarily stinging insects.

[11]*Ilios, City and Country of the Trojans* (New York 1881) 82.

[12]R. Daubney and E. A. Mahlau, *Research in Veterinary Science* 8 (1967) 375-97.