

“The Foreigner of 1854”: a short novel referring to the cholera epidemic of Athens in 1854

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Summary

Cholera was one of the great killers of all time. The disease had spread worldwide and affected human populations in seven deadly waves. The epidemic of cholera in Athens (1854) belongs to the third cholera pandemic (1839-1856), which started from Bengal (India) in 1839, spread worldwide to Middle East, Russia, struck the Western Europe and furthermore North and Latin America. In 1854, the pandemic moved from France to Greece and Turkey, by French troops returning from the Crimean War. Cholera first affected the port of Piraeus and soon reached Athens. The novel “The Foreigner of 1854”, although a literary text is written like a chronicle of the disease and many newspapers’ refers are embodied in it. Lycoudis narrates the abandonment of the city by the citizens, the panic among the rest population, the insufficient hospital beds and the efforts of the physicians to offer the most of the possible adjuvant therapeutic help to the patients. The state structures and the poor organization of those times had collapsed and the author presents a unique spectacle of an empty and destroyed small city, commenting social attitudes, humanity, religion, and criticizing all deniers of their duty. Every source referring to historical events, even literary texts, can often offer valuable information and details not traced in the official narrations.

Introduction

The epidemic of cholera in Athens (1854) belongs to the third cholera pandemic (1839-1856), which started from Bengal (India) in 1839,(1) spread worldwide to Middle East, Russia, struck the Western Europe(2) and furthermore North and Latin America. In 1854, the pandemic moved from France to Greece and Turkey, by French troops returning from the Crimean War. Cholera first affected the port of Piraeus and soon reached Athens.(3,4) The novel “The Foreigner of 1854”, although a literary text is written like a chronicle of the disease and many newspapers’ references are embodied in it. Lycoudis narrates the abandonment of the city by the citizens, the panic among the rest population, the insufficient hospital beds and the efforts of the physicians to offer the most of the possible adjuvant therapeutic help to the patients.

The state structures and the poor organization of those times had collapsed and the author presents a unique spectacle of an empty and destroyed small city, commenting social attitudes, humanity, religion, and criticizing all deniers of their duty.(5)

The historical events

Greece played a peripheral role in the Crimean War. When Russia attacked the Ottoman Empire in 1853, King Otto of Greece saw an opportunity to expand north and south into Ottoman areas that had large Greek Christian majorities. When the Russians invaded the Principalities, the Ottoman forces were tied down so Greece invaded Thessaly and Epirus. To block further Greek moves, the British and French occupied the main Greek port, Piraeus, from April 1854 to February 1857 (Anglo-French occupation), [Image 1] and effectively neutralized the Greek army. (6) Greece was not invited to the peace conference and made no gains out of the war. The frustrated Greek leadership blamed the King for failing to take advantage of the situation; his popularity plunged and he was later forced to abdicate. The British and French troops remained in Piraeus until 1857.(7,8)

The epidemic

Cholera caused hundreds thousands of deaths, in 1817, 1820, 1853-1854, 1865, 1883, 1893, and 1912-13 in Greece.(9,10) The largest cholera epidemic was that of 1853-1854, brought to Piraeus by the French troops, who occupied Athens and its port to prevent the participation of Greece in the Crimean War. The disease spread to Athens and then all over Greece, to Larissa, Syros,(11) Nafplion, and Mykonos. People fled to the villages to save themselves as doctors could offer no aid, the media of that era were rudimentary and the state was paralyzed. All rested their hopes in God and they prayed with Neophytos, the Archbishop of Athens, for the extinction of the disease.

The new-established Neo-Hellenic Nation (1830) and its capital Athens (1834) had never faced such a menace, [Image 2] although some preventive measures had been taken aiming mainly against pest. Legislation for the organization of the sanitary protection of the population such as lazarettos and other preventive care already existed, according to the scientific ideas of that period. The first appearance of cholera took place in the port of Piraeus among the members of the French and the British troops and rapidly expanded all over the city.(12) The Admiral of the French-British military forces Marie Charles Adelbert Le Barbier de Tinan (1803-1876) did not take any isolation measures to protect the city of Athens at least for the soldiers, who were free to go and return from the capital to the port. The first victims were buried in a small cemetery at Faliron, a place near Piraeus(13,14,15)

and the population of Piraeus fled to the neighboring islands (only 60 families remained in the small city) and no new death was noticed after August 20. Although, there was not a systematic vigilance of the communication between the two cities, the epidemic delayed its expansion to Athens. The sanitary situation in the first 30 years of the new capital was poor. Water supply was insufficient especially during the summer months and quite insufficient for personal and public hygiene. The total amount of clear water was collected and distributed to public fountains.(16, 17) Most of the houses were simple rooms into a common yard together with horse stables, one common bathroom and an open deep pit for sewage. The government of Alexander Mavrokordatos established a special hospital for cholera victims (the Director, physician George Stavridis was one of the victims) and a new Hygienic Committee for the Greek Capital. All these measures were finally proved useless.(18)

The first death occurred on September 29, a second on October 12, three or four on September 16. Five days later, a general fear of death flew over the city of the 30000 inhabitants and crowds (11000 according to the sources) ran away using horses, carriages, or walked carrying whatever could be useful for survivor. The organized State paralyzed and almost all the employees of the ministries and the other public organizations left their positions and their duties. The epidemic wave stopped at the beginning of December 1854.(19)

The literary impact of the cholera epidemic

There are only few authors referring to the first great epidemic of Athens. The first mention belongs to Babis Anninos, and is entitled “Athens 1850 Impressions of two French travelers, Maxime Du Camp and Gustave Flaubert”. Both the French visitors stayed at the Lazaretto of Piraeus and completed the obligatory quarantine because of a cholera epidemic before Athens.,(20,21,22) The second mention belongs to the famous Alexandros Papadiamandis with a short and a longer narration. The short one is entitled “The cholera victim” and takes place in the cholera epidemic of Athens in and the long “Guardian at the Hygienic Coast Guards” takes place in the island of Skiathos ten years later during another cholera epidemic(24) Another mention belongs to the author Gerassimos Vokos and his extended novel “The Occupation” referring to the English and French Occupation of Athens (1854-1857)(25) Anyway, the most descriptive and exact to the details of the epidemic panic is the narration of Emmanuel Lycoudis.

The author Emmanuel Lycoudis (1849-1925) [Image 3] was born in Nafplion and studied at the Law School of Athens University. In parallel to his juridical

career he was devoted to Literature. He had not the experience of the cholera epidemic, although some deaths occurred in his native city of Nafplion but the echo of the panic and the destruction of the ordinary life had survived in Athens. He met and spoke with certain eye witnesses and physicians of that period, as he ensured in his personal notes and comments. His novel is written like a diary of the disease and contains articles from the newspapers. Lycoudis entitled his short novel "The "Foreigner of 1854", as most of the Athenian people called the epidemic, because it was broadly believed that it did not belong to the city, some strangers brought it with them. Lycoudis characterized the epidemic as "the green-yellow Amazon of death", probably from the color of the patients and their vomits.

He gives another option of the beginning of the disease: as the Pre-minister of Greece, Alexander Mavrokordatos returned from Marseille, he was obliged to stay at quarantine in Malta because three soldiers died from cholera in his ship. The legend refers to a secret passenger, who was hidden into the ship, reached to Piraeus and was the responsible for the transmission of the contagious disease. On July 6, people in Athens was informed about the cholera in Piraeus, by a town crier and was panicked by the sound of tambours in the streets (many people in those times could not read the newspapers because of the high incidence of illiteracy). From July to August 20 the epidemic was isolated in Piraeus but soon the first case of cholera appeared in Athens, in its oldest neighborhood, Plaka. In a furious runaway to save their lives, some days later, the inhabitants left the city walking or riding or by carriages towards the villages of the area, such as Patissia, Maroussi, Kifissia, Marathon, Acharnes, Megara and more distant destinations, taking with them the most necessary things to carry or even without taking anything.(19) From a population of 30000 only 8000 remained in Athens. Even the Lord Mayor escaped and was replaced, no Ministers were to be found, no Public Services were functioning, all the shops were closed and it was extremely difficult to find bread or the precious rice considered as a benefit and safe food for healthy and suffering persons.(26) Lycoudis describes the medical aid offered by most of the physicians of Athens, some of them really sacrificing their own life and some trying to avoid the direct contacts with the victims. As the etiology remained unknown, the most accepted therapeutic method was the administration of opium, strychnine, anti-emetics, and many others, dividing sometimes the scientific opinions as there was not a real therapy. At night, medical assistance was easy to find as the Police has marked the physicians private houses with red and violet lights that reinforced the panic in an empty and silent city.

Lycoudis also refers to 3000 deaths, while official



image1: French troops in Piraeus (1854-1857).



image2: Athens, general view in 1854.



image3: Emmanuel Lycoudis (1849-1925)



image4: The Orphanage "Amalieion" (the old building)

statistics of the time restrict the number to 1000 deaths. There was not easy to have punctual statistics during the epidemic, as common tombs were used,

anonymous dead were carried to the already full cemeteries and were urgently buried elsewhere. Additionally, the author added the information that on November 14 (the peak of the epidemic) 200 deaths occurred only at the Military Hospital of Athens. The real tragedy at the Military Hospital of Athens (established in 1836), one of the first hospitals of the Greek capital, is described by Lycoudis. The beds were placed one by the other leaving just the space for the physicians and the nurses to pass through. Many patients could not find a bed and were placed on the floor, waiting for someone to die and empty his bed. Dead corpses were gathered in the hospital's yard, sometimes even naked. The author calls it “the valley of tears”. The emotional atmosphere of the small capital demands from the Archbishop of Athens, Neophytos to pray for the citizens and ask mercy from God sending away the cholera and protect the people from any further harm. Neophytos prayed together with all the people of Athens, while priests and citizens followed religious processions in the streets carrying icons of the Holy Virgin and the Saints, asking for divine help.

All the written sources, as well as the literary text of Lycoudis are referring to the role that King Otto and Queen Amelia played during the days of the epidemic. (27)They ordered the physician Linder Mayer to take care of the sick and poor patients. The royal couple never left the city and they tried to encourage the citizens, to visit many of the patients without fearing about their own lives and giving amounts to protect the orphans in a new orphanage, named upon Amelia as “Amalieion Orphanage”. A heroic lady, Maria Ypsilanti gathered about 300 orphans and unaccompanied children, who after the epidemic went to “Amalieion Orphanage” (1855) [Image 4] for girls or “Hadjikosta Orphanage” (1856) for boys.

Discussion

The novel of Lycoudis is unique in Greek Literature and although written several years later, it keeps the horrible moments and the fear of death, common in every epidemic. The author notes that he read again the description of Thucydides about the pest of Athens and found parallels to the feelings and the behavior of the people. It can also be added the “Journal of the Plague Year” by Daniel Defoe and the “The Plague” (French: La Peste) by Albert Camus, are some from the most famous books describing the human nature under extreme circumstances. Camus narrates the story of a plague sweeping the Algerian (then French) city of Oran. The book poses some questions about destiny and the human condition and all the characters in it help to show the effects of a plague on a populace. It is believed that the novel is based on the cholera epidemic that killed a large percentage of Oran's population in 1849 following French colonization and demonstrating certain similarities with the Greek

novel, as the events are very close in time and both cities were struck by the same cholera pandemic. Defoe vividly chronicles the progress of the epidemic in London in 1665, describing the deserted streets, the houses of death with cross daubed on their doors and the dead-carts on their way to the pits covered with lime. Besides them, the unknown Greek book adds its own narration to the history (allegoric sometimes) of the great epidemics.

Περίληψη

«Η Ξένη του 1854»: ένα διήγημα με θέμα την επιδημία χολέρας στην Αθήνα το 1854

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Η χολέρα υπήρξε μια από τις μάλιστα της Ανθρωπότητας. Η νόσος εξαπλώθηκε σε όλο τον πλανήτη πλήττοντας τον πληθυσμό της γης σε επτά θανάσιμα κύματα. Η χολέρα της Αθήνας (1854) ανήκει στο τρίτο κύμα (1839-1856), το οποίο είχε αφετηρία την Ινδία (Βεγγάλη) το 1839, εξαπλώθηκε στη Μέση Ανατολή, στη Ρωσία, στη Δυτική Ευρώπη και έφθασε μέχρι τη Βόρεια και τη Νότια Αμερική. Το 1854, η πανδημία μεταδόθηκε από τη Γαλλία στην Ελλάδα και την Τουρκία από τα Γαλλικά στρατεύματα που επέστρεφαν από τον Κριμαϊκό Πόλεμο. Η χολέρα έπληξε πρώτα το λιμάνι του Πειραιά και έφθασε σύντομα στην Αθήνα. Το διήγημα «Η Ξένη του 1854», αν και λογοτεχνικό κείμενο, είναι ωστόσο γραμμένο ως ημερολόγιο της νόσου και ενσωματώνει πολλές δημοσιογραφικές πληροφορίες του Τύπου της εποχής. Ο Εμμανουήλ Λυκούδης εξιστορεί την εγκατάλειψη της πόλης από τους κατοίκους της, τον πανικό που ξεσπά σε εκείνους που παραμένουν, τις ανεπαρκείς νοσοκομειακές κλίνες και τον αγώνα των γιατρών να προσφέρουν την καλύτερη δυνατή υποστηρικτική θεραπεία στους πάσχοντες. Οι κρατικές δομές και η ελλιπής οργάνωση της εποχής κατέρρευσαν και ως αποτέλεσμα παρουσιάζεται το σπάνιο θέαμα μιας άδειας και κατεστραμμένης μικρής πόλης. Ταυτόχρονα ο συγγραφέας σχολιάζει τις κοινωνικές στάσεις, τον ανθρωπισμό, τη στάση της Εκκλησίας και επικρίνει τους παραβάτες των καθηκόντων τους. Η συμβολή λογοτεχνικών κειμένων στην

πληροφόρηση ιστορικών γεγονότων είναι συνήθως πολύτιμη, καθώς το είδος προσφέρει λεπτομέρειες και αποχρώσεις που δεν ανευρίσκονται στις επιστημονικές πηγές.

Λέξεις κλειδιά:

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