READING 2

Candice Goucher, Charles LeGuin, and Linda Walton, "The Invisible Exchanges in the Ancient World," in *In the Balance: Themes in Global History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 254–5.

Abstract: This short piece discusses the diseases that inevitably traveled from place to place along with merchants and traders since ancient times. Whether those diseases were spread by rat fleas, poisoned grain, insects, or from person to person, the spread of disease along trade routes is as old as trade itself. Frequently, disease had dire consequences for the human populations in its path.

The Invisible Exchanges of the Ancient World

Far more than trade and tribute traveled along the economic roadways and sea-lanes of states and empires. Merchants carried with them not only ideas but also diseases that were invisible to the eyes of the world before 1500 C.E. The impact of both was great. It is believed that the plague that was known as the "Black Death," which devastated the population of Europe between 1347 and 1351 C.E., probably originated in India. It was transferred via the fleas carried by infected rats, which skillfully climbed the ropes of ships and sailed with merchants from India to Egypt and thus into the Mediterranean. Even earlier, epidemics (857 C.E.) in western Europe are thought to have been caused by poisoned grain, since the pathways of the disease followed established grain trade routes.

The links between the invisible realms of ideas and disease were sought both by ordinary people and by religious writers. In the Christian city of Carthage, the bishop Cyprian wrote a tract about the plague that raged during his time (251 C.E.): "Many of us are dying in this mortality, that is many of us are being freed from the world. This mortality is a bane to the Jews and pagans and enemies of Christ; to the servants of God it is a salutary departure. . . . How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race."

New patterns of contact among peoples created new epidemiological (distributions of disease in a population) frontiers. The creation of the Mongol Empire was particularly notable in shifting the boundaries of communities across a wide expanse, inevitably bringing together many peoples who shared trade routes and communications systems. Elsewhere, climatic and ecological conditions limited or increased the distribution of disease. Climatic changes in West Africa altered only slightly the territorial boundaries of insects such as mosquitoes and flies that were the carriers of certain diseases.

The presence of tropical conditions near the equator provided an inescapable breeding ground suitable for the spread of malaria, which has infected human and animal populations in Africa, South America, and much of South and Southeast Asia, where high infant mortality rates represent the constant battle with infection from ancient times to today.

Historical research continues to identify ancient diseases on the basis of current medical knowledge. The plague of Athens, for example, wiped out one-fourth of the city's population between 430 and 427 B.C.E. The Greek historian Thucydides wrote that after the "abrupt onset, persons in good health were seized" with various symptoms, including "in most cases an empty heaving ensued… produced a strong spasm." Recently, the Greek word *lugx* ("heaving") was retranslated to mean "hiccup," and the symptoms Thucydides described were identified as the earliest known outbreak of the Ebola virus, which in the 1990s produced uncontrollable hiccuping in victims in the Congo (Zaire).