Empire and Ecology in the Second Plague Pandemic: The Ottoman Experience Revisited

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The Black Death pandemic of the mid-fourteenth century swept across a substantial portion of Afro-Eurasia, stretching from Central Asia to the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa. Producing an estimated mortality of up to fifty percent, the pandemic brought significant social, demographic, and economic changes everywhere it touched. However catastrophic, the Black Death was only a brief episode in the history of the so-called Second Pandemic. Recurrent outbreaks continued over several centuries until plague gradually started to recede—from northern and western Europe in the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, from Russia in the late eighteenth, and from the Ottoman Middle East in the late nineteenth. As the last stronghold of the pandemic, the Ottoman case invites new possibilities for rethinking the end of the pandemic.

The Ottoman experience of plague (from ca.1340s to ca.1840s—five-hundred years of uninterrupted plagues), the longest continuous manifestation of plague in recorded human history, merits a systematic investigation. Situating the Ottoman case at the center of historical inquiry allows us to question, re-conceptualize, and unsettle current historical and scientific wisdom about past plagues. This spatio-temporal intervention to the historiography not only invites exploiting new approaches, methodologies, and sources, but also promises to free plague scholarship from the prevailing European exceptionalism. Adopting a longer, multi-century timescale facilitates detecting the pandemic’s ebb and flow over the longue durée.

In this presentation, I will draw from my new book project, Empire, Ecology, and Plague: Rethinking the Second Pandemic (ca.1340s-ca.1840s), which examines five-hundred years of Ottoman plague experience in its entirety. Using historical, epidemiological, and ecological approaches, I examine the transformations of the Ottoman plague experience, emphasizing connections to the larger environment. To this end, I use a variety of sources and methodologies, including Ottoman and non-Ottoman archival and narrative sources, art history and literature (especially for animals and nature), and draw from bio- and zoo-archeological analysis of human and animal remains, aDNA analysis of Yersinia pestis, historical epidemiology and digital mapping, ecology, and climate science.