

For the best part of the twentieth century, descriptions of the Black Death, 1346-1353, were a recurrent theme in almost all serious works on the general history of Europe and most European countries.

From these more or less standard works we learnt to know the main outlines and the overall picture: The Plague was brought to the Black Sea region from the east, by a Mongol army besieging the Crimean town of Caffa (now Feodosia). When the Mongols began to die of the disease they started catapulting the dead bodies over the city walls. People inside the walls contracted the disease, which was caused by fleas and other insects feeding on infected rodents. The fleas then found their way to humans, infected them, and travelled with their hosts, Italian seamen on board of Italian merchantmen's ships, from Caffa to Constantinople, where a pandemic broke out and spread across the Aegean, to Aleppo in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt and then across the Middle East. Simultaneously, the disease seems to have spread along the east and south coasts of the Black Sea into Anatolia. From Constantinople the plague travelled west into the Balkans. The Italian ships sailed from Constantinople to Italy, carrying the infected persons still alive, and their goods, often inhibited by the infected fleas, to Genoa and Venice, and perhaps some other Italian ports. There the disease broke out again and gradually spread over most of western and northern Europe, causing greater mortality than any previously known epidemic.

Something like this sounded the simplified version of the history of the Black Death most students were familiar with during much of the twentieth century. Understandably, other pandemics in history, before or after the Black Death, received much less attention. Today our knowledge of the spread of the plague is more detailed and accurate, not least thanks to a recent leap in plague scholarship based on scientific research and the cooperation of scientists and historians. Today, students of plague history can simultaneously make use of scientific research and historical sources and the result is revolutionary. In the introduction to her new book Nükheth Varlik describes the current situation in international scholarship such:

*Presently, there is international scholarship consensus that the three historical pandemics that were believed to have been Y. Pestis-caused plague were indeed so: the First Pandemic, known as the Justinianic Plague (541 to circa 750); the Second Pandemic, known as the*

*Black Death (1346-53), and its recurrent waves, which continued for centuries after the initial outbreak; and the Third Pandemic, which spread globally after its eruption in Hong Kong in 1894.*

As Nükhet Varlik clearly demonstrates, the outbreak usually termed as the Black Death was far from being the only plague pandemic harrassing the Mediterranean world, the Middle East and Europe during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. The disease was recurrent in these parts of the world for centuries. It was characterized by sudden and often violent outbreaks that usually lasted for some months (most often the warmest months of the year) and then receded. After each outbreak it was dormant for some time, until the next eruption took place and not always in the same place. Cities, ports and towns on frequently travelled roads were more likely to suffer from these outbreaks than other places or areas. The disease receded in western Europe from the eighteenth century onwards, but lingered on in the Ottoman empire until the late nineteenth century and even longer.

A great leap has taken place in plague studies since the 1970s. Thanks to careful study of Ottoman historiography and the combined efforts of historians and reasearchers in natural sciences, our knowledge of the plague, its origins and behaviour is much better today than only some few decades ago.

Nükhet Varlik has studied Ottoman historiography on the plague extensively. Her new book is based on this research as well as the works of other scholars in several countries. Her main emphasis is on the history of the plague in Ottoman-controlled lands in the early modern period. She demonstrates that the Ottoman empire was repeatedly hit by waves of plague during the one-and-a-half centuries from about 1450 until 1600. In this period she has discerned three main phases, the first one lasting from 1453 until 1517, the second one from 1517 until 1570 and the third from 1570 until the turn of the century 1600. She discusses each of these three phases thoroughly, the spread and nature of the plague, how it affected the population, the State, etc.

In my opinion this new book is a most valuable contribution to the study of the plague's history in Europe, and especially in the Mediterranean and Ottoman world. It is based on the research of material hitherto unknown to many western scholars and on a profound knowledge of the geographical area and societies studied. Moreover, the book contains

several fresh perspectives and much knowledge that is most probably new to many western scholars.

Share this:

Share