



Journal of Universal History Studies

**Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman
Experience, 1347-1600 / Nükhet Varlık¹**

Akdeniz Dünyasında ve Osmanlılarda Veba, 1347-1600 / Nükhet Varlık

Cambridge University Press, New York, July 2015, 356 pages, ISBN: 978-110-7013-38-4

Submission Type: Book Review

Received-Accepted: 08.05.2022 / 19.05.2022

pp. 129-132

Journal of Universal History Studies (JUHIS) • 5(1) • June • 2022 •

Ozancan Bozkurt

Koç University, Graduate Student, İstanbul, Turkey

Email: obozkurt21@ku.edu.tr

Orcid Number: 0000-0001-9882-6713

Cite: Bozkurt, O. (2022). Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347-1600 / Nükhet Varlık . Journal of Universal History Studies , 5 (1) , 129-132 . Retrieved from <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/juhis/issue/70537/1113894>

¹ This article is analyzed by one reviewers and it is screened for the resemblance rate by the editor/ Bu makale bir hakem tarafından incelenmiş ve editör tarafından benzerlik oranı taramasından geçirilmiştir.

* In this article, the principles of scientific research and publication ethics were followed/ Bu makalede bilimsel araştırma ve yayın etiği ilkelerine uyulmuştur.

* This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/) (Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike).

Nükhet Varlık, who completed her undergraduate and graduate studies at Boğaziçi University, received her Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 2008. She currently works as Associate Professor in the History Department at Rutgers University and continues her research on subjects such as medicine, epidemics, and death in the Ottoman Empire. *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600* is the first systematic and critical historical study to examine the plague experience of the Ottoman Empire between the late medieval and early modern period within the framework of its political and social dimensions. In addition, the fact that the book was awarded both in Turkey and abroad following the years it was published reveals the impact and the importance of the work

Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600, has been published by Cambridge University Press. The work consists of 356 pages in total. The work is divided into three different parts and consists of eight chapters. The first part is devoted to theoretical and methodological issues. In this part, after giving a brief history of plague studies in Ottoman historiography, the author sheds light on the current debates, developments, and challenges in the literature. The second part analyzes the Ottoman empire's encounters with the plague and the relationship between this interaction and the change in the administrative structure of the Empire. The book's third part explores how the Ottoman Empire perceived the plague and how ways of imagining the plague transformed and shaped their discourse and policies regarding the plague.

Chapter 1 provides a brief review of the natural history of plague in the light of scientific advances in the Plague pathogen. Thanks to these developments, the opportunity to obtain more elaborated information on non-human actors such as rodents, arthropods, and environmental conditions in the spread of plague has emerged. Thus, Varlık emphasizes the importance of developing a multi-layered perspective that brings together the evidence of scientific and historical research to comprehend the plague experiences of the Ottomans better. Chapter 2 discusses the limitations of previous historical studies on plague and epidemics in Ottoman historiography. There has been an increase in historical studies examining epidemic diseases with the Turkish Medical History Institution. However, according to Varlık, such studies were insufficient because they were written solely for medical education and within the modernist/nationalist paradigm framework. Since the 1970s, there have been studies dealing with different plague experiences in non-European areas. Still, they used abstract binary categories such as Christian-Muslim and Eastern-Western to demystify differences in plague experiences. Therefore, the author criticizes their conceptual frameworks for being orientalist to a certain extent. Chapter 3 attempts to clarify the plague's origins by tracing the plague epidemic's spread during the Black Death and its aftermath (1347-1453). The disease spread not only in the coastal regions but also into Anatolia via trade routes. Moreover, Varlık criticized the studies suggesting that the expansion of the Ottoman Empire was the result of the spread of the plague and argued that there might be an inverse relationship between the two phenomena.

Chapter 4 focuses on the manifold relationship between trade networks, territorial expansions, urbanization, and the first phase of the plague (1453-1517) in the Ottoman Empire. The author stresses that since the territorial expansion of the Ottoman Empire and its transformation into a central empire, diversified regions were connected by commercial and administrative networks. Hence, the plague spread and expanded its domain further through different networks. Another crucial factor is urbanization. Developing the commercial/organizational structure has caused the places previously Anatolian towns to become city centers.

This situation caused the spread of the plague and its more frequent occurrence. Chapter 5 maps out the formation of new plague networks and the increasing importance of Istanbul for these networks with the increase of commercial and political connections. In the second phase, between 1517-1570, a new circulation network circulating between Istanbul and Cairo appeared. Hence, we can say that the consequence of new conquests and the development of urban centers made the exchange of disease possible even in regions that seemed very unrelated to each other. Moreover, compared to the first phase, the frequency and severity of the epidemic waves have also augmented. Chapter 6 uncovers the third plague phase (1570-1600), in which the patterns of spread seen in the first and second stages continue. This phase appears as a single wave as aftershocks often begin to occur. It is also the deadliest wave due to its devastating and long-lasting effects. At the same time, at this stage, the disease became a permanent part of Istanbul and thus significantly shaped the way the Ottomans perceived and reacted to the plague.

The first chapter of the third part (Chapter 7) tries to demystify how Ottoman society comprehended the plague and how they produced information, discourses, and reactions about it. Varlık stresses that there were considerable transformations in the understanding and attitude of the Ottomans during the 16th century when the plague was effective. The author claims that this change has three crucial components. One of them is naturalization, which means that the plague, previously associated with external and extraordinary phenomena, is now adopted as a part of daily life since it began to integrate into Ottoman culture. The second component is medicalization. While only religious and metaphysical elements were encountered in diagnosing and preventing the plague, more systematic medical knowledge emerged in the 16th century. Ottomans started to investigate the causes and origins of epidemics, and medical classifications and methods appeared that made it easier to distinguish plague from other diseases. Therefore, the diagnosis and treatment of the plague began to be removed from the responsibility of sections such as the saints and dervishes, and the struggle against the plague started to become the duty of health institutions. The last component is canonization. As the plague epidemics took place as a part of daily life, the measures taken against it started to become a habit and then the norm. Norms crystallized in legal regulations, so canonization reached its highest level. Chapter 8 is devoted to a rigorous examination of health measures against plague in Ottoman cities, especially Istanbul in the early modern period. In order to cope with the increasing deaths, the Ottoman state resorted to various methods, from keeping records of deaths to getting rid of the material and spiritual elements seen as filth in cities. Thus, the plague led to the emergence of new governance techniques that controlled and regulated the human body and population health in the Ottoman Empire.

One of the critical contributions of Nükhet Varlık's book to the plague history literature is to discuss the possible contributions of integrating the latest scientific developments into the history of plague. According to her, in the light of these developments, it is possible to carry out more comprehensive and in-depth studies focusing on new research questions. Especially in the first part of the work, where she illuminates the natural history of the plague, the author has shown that in practice. Another important contribution is that, unlike some previous studies, it reveals a common plague experience by examining the interactions between different countries in the Mediterranean rather than focusing on a single region. Thus, instead of using orientalist binary concepts such as East-West or Muslim-Christian, the author put forward a study covering multi-layered relations between regions. An example of this is the follow-up of the origin and impact of incoming networks that emerged in different stages of the plague. At the same time, it provides an ample perspective covering the relationship between plague, state, and society in the Ottoman Empire without

neglecting this common historical process. Thus, we can see how the experience of the plague affected the administrative system and the politics of the Ottoman Empire or vice versa. Moreover, Varlık does not neglect the effects of the disease on the cultural meaning. It also reveals how the way the Ottoman society perceived the plague changed. It is possible to say that it is one of the most systematic and robust studies on this subject.

Overall, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347-1600*, is a book that systematically and comprehensively analyzes the complex nature of the plague experience in the Mediterranean civilization, especially the Ottoman Empire, in the early modern period. By examining the discourse and practices related to the plague, she reveals the story of its political and economic transformation and development. Benefiting from the progress in positive sciences as well as historical sources shows that it is insightful not only in terms of content but also methodologically. Thereby, it is a recommended book in terms of content and method for those who are interested in both plague history and Ottoman and Mediterranean history.