



Over the last few months, it has sometimes seemed that the name of this SRII bulletin would make more sense in Swedish, where the word *kalabalik* mostly implies confusion, than in the Turkish original, where it rather evokes the vision of a crowded street. As the Covid-19 pandemic began to spread throughout Europe in the late winter, there was decidedly much of the former and increasingly little of the latter, and when the institute staff and guests all vacated the premises in mid-March it was in a surreal realisation that no one really knew when life would return to normal on Istiklal Caddesi. The picture above was taken by the consulate's cultural attaché Mike Bode on one of the many days of lockdown that have followed since, and which you can learn more about by reading our research officer Helin Topal's report in this issue.

Still, wherever we all have landed, we seem to have taken with ourselves from Istanbul that famous cat-like ability to do so on our feet, and as the summer approaches and many countries make cautious attempts to open up, we are glad to say that the institute has not succumbed to confusion and despair, but kept going as much as circumstances have permitted, and used the situation to try out new forms of interaction through online arrangements and podcasts. You can read more about this in this issue's newsletter, which our director Ingela Nilsson has written from her "exile" in Uppsala.

We have also taken the pandemic as an invitation to friends and scholars to offer their own perspectives on the situation in this issue of *Kalabalik!* You will find here an interview with Christine Amadou, whose Norwegian translation of Albert Camus' *The Plague* came out just this spring, an essay by our fellow Igor Torbakov on literary descriptions of lockdown situations, and an article by Geoffrey Greatrex that draws parallels from the reception of Covid-19 to that of the Justinianic Plague, the perhaps first pandemic of its kind, which had its epicenter in Constantinople – Istanbul – in the mid-sixth century.

Olof Heilo, *Kalabalik!* editor and SRII deputy director

## A few words from the director in exile

*Ingela Nilsson, SRII director*

I know it is the same for all of us: the last few months didn't exactly turn out as we planned them. But looking back at this strange and in many ways sad spring, there have still been some scholarly, cultural and interpersonal highlights.

We began the semester by having two new authors in residence: Jesper Huor and Namdar Nasser. Jesper undertook an adventurous journey to south-east Turkey, doing research for his new book project, while Namdar rediscovered Istanbul – a city he first visited in the 1980s. At a well-attended evening in January, they talked about individual and collective voices, displacement and nostalgia, antagonism and desire.

We also had a few research fellows with us for the first part of the semester: Patrik Hällzon, Mihály Pokorni and Igor Torbakov, along with the RJ researcher Helena Bodin and visiting PhD student Ewan Short. Unfortunately, most of them had to break off their stay and leave Istanbul in mid-March, but we hope to have them back in the autumn or as soon as they can fit a visit into their schedule. You can read a contribution by Igor in this issue of *Kalabalık!*

The theme of the spring lectures was *Classicism(s) and Orientalism(s)*, skillfully introduced in a lecture by Olof Heilo in early February. We could host only one more lecture before we had to close the institute, but the memory of Rachel Mair's wonderful presentation of archaeologists, tourists and dragomans still lingers with me. The remaining speakers have been invited to come to Istanbul in the spring of 2021, when we will return to this fascinating topic. In the meantime, you can enjoy Olof's talk if you go to our new homepage and check out the page where we are uploading our podcasts: [srii.org/pages/hubbub](http://srii.org/pages/hubbub)

On March 18, I left Istanbul together with the last fellows. On the evening before, we had a lovely Black Sea salmon from the fish market in Karaköy, served with vegetables from the Tarlabası pazarı – Helena and I had done our grocery shopping on Sunday morning, not knowing that we would have to leave a couple of days later. It was sad to leave and close the institute, but everything went smoothly thanks to good communication with the Consulate General and the kind help, as ever, of Havva and Hüseyin.

We felt very confused at first: what do you do with a research institute when you cannot receive fellows and organize events? But after a lot of thinking and long discussions, we are now getting back on our feet. We have organized two workshops by Zoom, one of translation and multilingualism in May, another on the Byzantine romances in June, and our very first *Dialoglar* event in collaboration with the cultural section at the Consulate General. At the latter, some



*Leaving Istanbul, March 18, 2020.*

*Photo: Helena Bodin*



*The first Dialoglar events, which took place via Zoom on May 28. In the pictures: Ela Gökalp Aras, Mats Rosengren, Ulaş Tosun and Tomas Thorén, with moderator Zeynep Serinkaya in the middle as well as Hakan Abdi and Harun Durmuş in the smaller thumbnails above (screenshots by Ela Gökalp Aras, Olof Heilo, Mike Bode and Alev Karaduman)*

hundred participants (!) watched a selection of short films on the theme of migration roads, followed by a panel discussion brilliantly moderated by Zeynep Serinkaya. A Swedish summary of the event can be found at [blogg.kulturdep.se/kulturradsbloggen/migration-roads/](http://blogg.kulturdep.se/kulturradsbloggen/migration-roads/)

Since we currently cannot offer assistance to Nordic scholars in Turkey, we have taken the opportunity to provide help in the other direction: for the next few months, we are supporting a visiting researcher at Uppsala university, Selda Tuncer, who has previously presented her work about women and public space both at the institute – a topic that has gained additional relevance and partly new dimensions during to the Covid-19 lockdown. You can find a summary of her research in this issue, and if you go to our podcast page you will also find an interview from when we met in Uppsala in May.



The autumn plans include the return of research fellows and the organization of workshops, along with a lecture series on the theme of *Language and Communication*, the preliminary program can be found on the last page of this issue. While we really hope to meet in real life, Zoom remains a convenient alternative for both workshops and lectures. Hopefully we can learn from this unfortunate situation and come out stronger, together, on the other side.

Stay safe and see you soon!

*Salmon from the Black Sea.  
Photo: Ingela Nilsson*

## Istanbul i Coronans tid

*Helin Topal, forskningssekreterare SFII*

Så snart nyheterna börjat spridas om ett nytt coronavirus från Kina, insåg man situationens allvar även i Turkiet. Hälsoministern proklamerade beslutet att bilda en vetenskaplig rådgivande kommitté (Bilim Kurulu) redan 10 januari. Därefter var nyheterna om coronavirus nummer ett på alla nyhetsändringar. Redan i början av februari hade Turkiet stoppat flygtrafiken mellan Kina och Turkiet. Sedan följde samma beslut om Italien, Sydkorea och Irak.

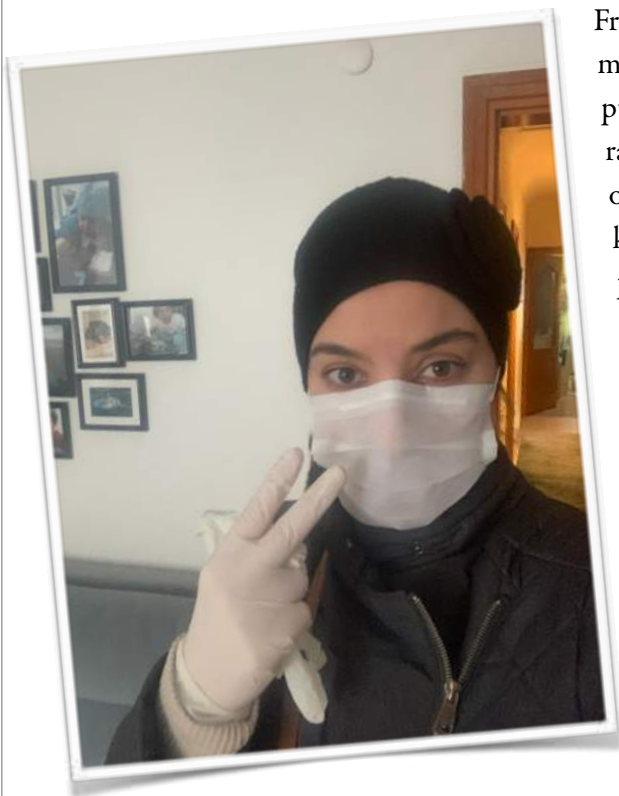
I början av mars var coronaviruset nästan det enda man pratade om i landet. Det första bekräftade fallet offentliggjordes 11 mars. Nästa dag tog regeringen beslutet att stänga alla skolor runt om i landet från och med måndagen 16 mars. Barnen skulle då få en veckas ledighet och börja med "distansskola" via TV och internet från och med den 23 mars. Beslutet skulle tillsvidare gälla till i början av april.

Just i början av mars började vi också diskutera läget på institutet och med generalkonsulatet. Åtgärder i form av desinfektionsmedel, omorganisering av besök utifrån och vetenskaplig informationsdelning om viruset togs tillsammans med konsulatet. Ärligt talat var vi fortfarande hoppfulla om att vi skulle kunna fortsätta med verksamheten, men insåg inom kort att vi var tvungna att tänka om. När information om första fallet kom i Turkiet tog vi också beslutet att ställa in samtliga utåtriktade evenemang från och med den 16 mars till slutet av april. Institutet var dock fortfarande öppet för stipendiater och gästforskare som redan var på plats.

Måndagen 16 mars kändes nästan som att gå in i en annan dimension eller hamna i en dålig film. Turkiets regering proklamerade olika beslut att förbjuda gemensamma bönestunder på moskéer, stänga biografier, konserthus, kaféer, gym och bröllopslokaler tillsvidare och flygförbud för resor till och från flera länder. Då hade Turkiet 47 bekräftade Corona-fall. Efter detta beslutade vi också att tömma institutet och skicka hem alla forskare. Vår direktör Ingela Nilsson och vice direktör Olof Heilo bokade var sin resa till Sverige och institutet började jobba på distans. Vi tog kontakt med alla våra forskare och gäster som var bokade till början av maj och förklarade läget och avbokade deras rum. Inom ett par dagar skulle vi inse att vi var precis i tid med att skicka hem alla våra forskare för gränser runt om i hela världen stängdes en efter en och en ny period med "livet hemma" började för nästan alla.

Jag och min man, med vår lilla son som går i första klass och min över 65-åriga mamma på samma gata, har nu varit helt instängda hemma i nästan tre månader. Jag måste säga att det verkligen har varit en utmaning. Jag fortsätter att jobba hemifrån samtidigt som min son får någon sorts hemmaskola. Min man som är professionell musiker kan inte jobba alls just nu. Vi går bara ut för att handla det nödvändiga för oss själva och för min mamma ungefär en gång i veckan. Så ser livet ut för de flesta just nu i Istanbul.

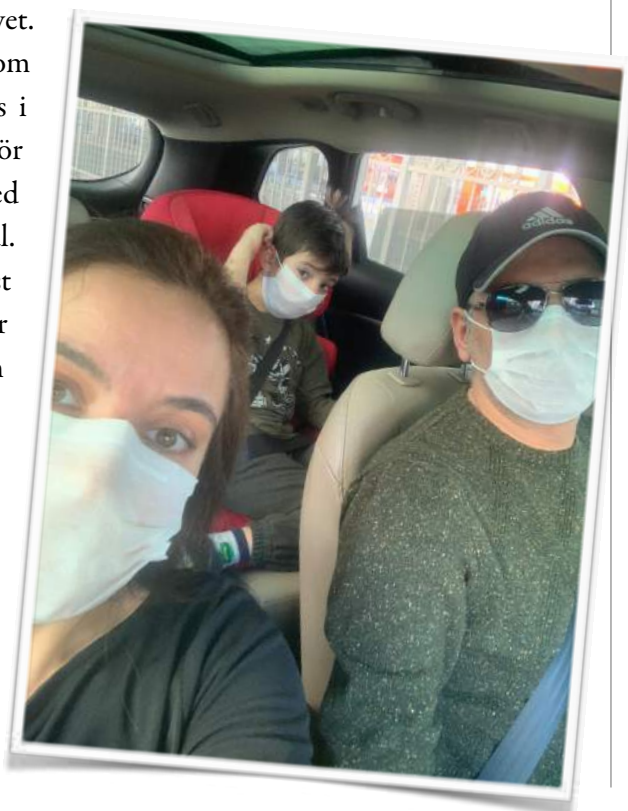




Från början var man bara uppmanad att stanna hemma, men snart infann sig olika slags förbud. Först förbjöds alla publika möten, aktiviteter och evenemang. Restaurangerna fick inte ha sittande kunder. Sedan kom beslutet om att förbjuda alla som är över 65 år eller lider av kroniska sjukdomar att överhuvudtaget gå ut. Parker, promenadvägar vid stränder, skogar och historiska platser skulle vara stängda. Resor mellan städer inom Turkiet begränsades och stoppades helt i början av april. Samtidig kom förbud för alla som är under 20 år att gå ut. Köpcentrum runt om i landet stängde. Mataffärer, apotek, vårdcentraler och sjukhus var de enda platser som fortsatte sin verksamhet. Det första allmänna utgångsförbudet kom 10 april och skulle gälla bara för helgen. Sedan fortsatte dessa förbud varje helg till början av juni samtidig som antal fall ökade i landet. Jag bör tillägga här att Istanbul har 60% av alla bekräftade Corona-fall i Turkiet.

Att vara hemma hela tiden har varit svårast för barnfamiljer och äldre. I mitten av maj kom ett beslut om att barn fick gå ut på på onsdagar mellan kl 11–15 och äldre på söndagar mellan vissa tider. Men det kompenserade så klart inte det verkliga behovet. Båda samhällsgrupperna mår inte så bra eftersom de inte kan mätta sina fysiska och sociala behov. Utbildningsdepartementet har beslutat att inte öppna skolorna igen för denna termin. Skolor i hela landet planeras att öppna 31 augusti, vilket betyder att barnfamiljer måste hitta nya sätt att underhålla sina barn med ”social distans” i tre månader till.

I slutet av maj höjdes alltfler röster för att normalisera livet. Regeringen hanterade situationen på två plan: genom hälsovården och ekonomin. Man är i stort sett överens i samhället om att hälsovården har fungerat väl. Här bör särskilt påpekas att Turkiet har många sjukhus med intensivvård och en formlig armé av hälsovårdspersonal. Läkarutbildningen är en av de utbildningar som har högst kvalitet. Det har alltså inte varit svårt att hitta plats för dem som behövde intensivvård. Hälsovårdsministern vann många sympatier med sitt lugna sätt, genom att dagligen informera samhället på presskonferenser och svara på frågor. Men när det gäller ekonomin och åtgärder som utgångsförbud, stöd för dem som förlorat sina arbeten eller varit tvungna att stänga sina affärer, är responsen mera blandad. Det har utlovats olika ekonomiska paket men också startats en kampanj för att att samla pengar från allmänheten som skulle delas ut till dem som saknade inkomster. Denna kampanj

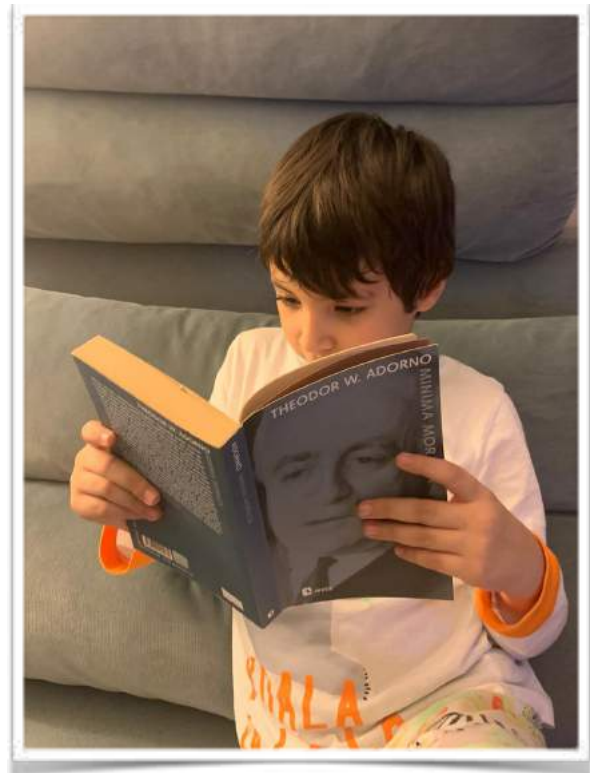


kritiserades starkt. De kommuner som styrs av oppositionspartierna har drivit sina egna kampanjer för att hjälpa utsatta, men då dessa stoppades av regeringen orsakade det ytterligare spänningar. Samtidigt som den vetenskapliga rådgivande kommittén rekommenderade att åtgärderna som reseförbud, utgångsförbud etc. borde bibehållas började röster från olika grupper i samhället höjas mer och mer om att de inte kan tjäna pengar för sitt levebröd. Därav kom beslutet om att släppa de flesta restriktioner från och med den 1 juni då Turkiet hade 164 769 positiva fall, 4 563 dödsfall och 128 947 friskförklarade. Reseförbud mellan städerna lyftes. Utegångsförbud skulle inte gälla längre. Man uppmanade dock alla att fortsätta vara försiktiga med hygien och social distans.

Beslutet välkomnades av olika grupper i samhället men samtidigt fanns oron kvar hos många. Istanbul som har över 20 miljoner invånare har stora svårigheter att hålla social distans. I synnerhet efter så lång tid kastade sig folk ut nästan på en gång. Det finns fortfarande en stor del av samhället som försöker stanna i den egna miljön och hålla distans, men det finns ändå miljoner som är ute och rör sig varje dag. Många har åkt till sina hemtrakter eller sommarhus vilket visar sig tydligt i antal ökade fall i andra städer. 15 dagar efter beslutet om "det nya normala" ser man att antal dagliga fall började återigen gå över 1 500 per dag, vilket lett till diskussioner om vilka nya beslut som kan komma i fråga.

Efter tre månader med pandemin och flera försök att skriva klart den här texten har jag upptäckt att det inte går att avsluta kapitlet. Varje dag vaknar man till ett nytt moment och nya förslag från alla sorters "experter". Man vill så gärna hoppas på att livet ska återgå till det normala, men oron överskuggar alla förhoppningar just nu. Det finns prognoser om att den ekonomiska krisen kommer att slå hårt. Även om affärer, kaféer, restauranger och hotell har öppnat sina dörrar, tvekar de flesta om det är säkert att gå dit. Kultursektorn har drabbats mycket hårt och det ser inte ut att de kan återgå till det normala i det närmaste. Arbetslösheten har ökat, och som det är nu så finns det inga nya möjligheter för alla som söker jobb. Man talar hela tiden om "en andra våg" av pandemin. Men människan har en otrolig förmåga att överleva, och så länge det finns liv finns det alltid sätt att anpassa sig och hitta en ny normalitet.

15 juni 2020





## Hello there ...

**Christine Amadou, who has just translated *The Plague* by Camus into Norwegian!**

*Over the past few weeks, we have read about the renaissance of literary works like *The Plague* and *Decamerone* – why do you think people want to read about historical or fictional plagues while experiencing a pandemic?*

I think Camus' novel is interesting because it "speaks" with the whole plague tradition. Camus introduces the ancient images of the plague, as known from Thucydides, Lucretius and Boccaccio, and he places it in what he describes as a modern, commercial and quite ordinary city. In his descriptions of the plague, seen through the eyes of the doctor Rieux, these ancient historians were his models. He wanted to

give a report as sober and clinical as theirs. Not the least, he wanted to describe the relationship between a peaceful urban life and an unpredictable plague epidemic. This is why he made the Algerian market town Oran a microcosm where human coexistence was put to the test by a plague of ancient dimensions. And this is probably why we read both Camus and Boccaccio with such an interest, because we can recognize a old experience in new settings. The novels open new perspectives for our own situation and for the history, but the most interesting for me has been to see how the unexpected situation we experience today sheds a new light over the novel of Camus.

*I was taught in school that Camus was writing an allegory, but perhaps people are prone to read it differently under the current circumstances. Do you think there are any similarities between the narrative of Camus and the present situation?*

When translating the novel I felt, without being able to say exactly how, that this allegorical interpretation was in some way *démodé*. As is the genre of a philosophical novel discussing evil, religion and human value. Now when we are all more or less confined, I see a new dimension in it, as it tells us how people behave in an unpredictable situation when all contact with the rest of the world is cut off. Camus himself stated emphatically in an interview "it is clear that the novel is about the European resistance to Nazism, but I wanted *The Plague* to be read on many different levels." One of these levels is from the confinement perspective, and from the perspective of a sudden and dramatic change in a world that is not at all prepared for it. The novel present a group of men (only men!) (re)acting in quite different ways to the new situation. Among them the journalist Rambert who tries by all means to escape from the city as he doesn't belong there, but who ends up working in the sanitary hospital "because it may be shameful to be happy by oneself". The mysterious Cottard who thrives on the plague. The hard working doctor Rieux who describes, understands and helps. And not the least: the civil servant Grand, who gives us a splendid

meta-perspective as he is “struggling with the words”: He tries to write a novel from times without plague, but is unable to finish the very first phrase on “a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a handsome sorrel mare along the flowery avenues of the Bois de Boulogne”.

*People who don't read Camus might be watching blockbusters like Contagion or World War Z instead. To what extent, you think, do fictional imaginaries influence the way we experience things in real life?*

Of course, the fictional imaginaries influence the way we experience things in real life. But let me begin in the other end: we choose books and films depending on the situation in which we live. To understand life, or to escape from it. Our life situation, and who we are, also colors the way we read and see. Like the modern epidemic gives room to new readings of Camus, and the German occupation offered Camus new ways of reading the classical authors.

These crisscrossings between reality and fiction and the usefulness of fiction as a response to reality are expressed in the epigraphic citation on the front page of *The Plague*, in the words of Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*: “It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.”

Interview: Ingela Nilsson

For those of you who read Norwegian, Christine's translation can be found here:

<http://solumforlag.no/boker/pesten>

There is also a new Swedish translation by Jan Stolpe:

<https://www.albertbonniersforlag.se/boker/227339/pesten/>



## Don't leave your room!

Igor Torbakov, Uppsala University

In situations that seem to be quite unprecedented, people – these ever curious creatures – still tend to look for some precedents. Thus it comes as no surprise that these days, confined to their abodes, confused and distressed by all the havoc the current pandemic has left in its wake, *Homo legens* rushed to the bookshelves.

Some of us, seeking instruction or distraction, might grab a copy of *La Peste* by Albert Camus and relive, with the help of the novel's narrator, an "existential situation" in a godforsaken town in French Algeria hard hit by a plague. To be sure, many contemporary readers, traumatized by the long period of self-isolation, would find one of Camus' leading ideas resonating with their recent experience: the individuals' perennial inability to take control over their destinies.

Others might opt for some seemingly light reading and reach for a nicely bound volume of *Il Decameron* by Boccaccio to enjoy the tales that a group of ten young people entertained themselves with over a two-week period of seclusion. The stories they shared varied widely, ranging from the erotic to the tragic. It is, however, the circumstances in which the storytelling took place that would catch an eye of our self-isolated contemporaries. These ten youngsters took shelter in a deserted villa in Fiesole, in the rolling hills above the plague-stricken Florence, hoping to sit out the 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death epidemic.

Yet you might also pull out of a bookcase your favorite collection of poems – a dog-eared tome that you've read zillion times – and suddenly appreciate the revelatory (even prophetic!) aspect of the author's poetic imagination that you had never realized previously. It is of course the current pandemic and the "new rules of the game," which it threatens to turn into a new norm, that help one to see some literary classics in the new light.

Here are two striking examples. One is the 1970 poem by Joseph Brodsky. Brodsky had just turned 30 and was literally suffocating in the stuffy political and cultural atmosphere of the Brezhnev rule, aptly called the "stagnation." The poem he penned exactly fifty years ago is a sarcastic description of life choices a typical member of Soviet intelligentsia was faced with back then. The Russian intellectuals' existence and outward reality were so bleak that Brodsky bitterly advises them to stay indoors since venturing out under Soviet conditions appeared to make no sense. But reach the poem's final line and – being read today – it will morph into a sardonic paean to self-isolation – a regime that Brodsky himself would definitely hate.

Don't leave the room, don't blunder, do not go on.  
If you're smoking Shipka, what good is the Sun?  
Outside, all is meaningless, especially – the cry of joy.  
To the lavatory and back straightaway, old boy.

Oh, don't leave the room, don't call for a cab, my friend.  
Because Space is a corridor that will end  
with a meter. And, if your dear, delight expressing,  
walks inside, kick her out without undressing.

Don't leave the room; pretend that you have a cold.  
 Four walls and a chair entice like nothing else in the world.  
 Why leave the place that you'll surely return to late in  
 the night, as you were, only more – mutilated?

Oh, don't leave the room. Enchanted, dance bossa nova  
 in shoes worn on bare feet, in a coat draped over  
 your naked body. The hall reeks of ski wax and cabbage.  
 You've written a lot; more would be extra baggage.

Don't leave the room. Let only the room imagine a little  
 what you might look like. And besides, incognito  
 ergo sum, as form itself learned from substance once.  
 Don't leave the room! Outside, you will not find France.

Don't be a fool! Be what others weren't. Remain.  
 Don't leave the room! Let the furniture have free reign,  
 blend in with wallpaper. Bolt the door, barricade in place  
 with a dresser from chronos, cosmos, eros, virus, race.

My second example is a short poem by W. H. Auden. As is well known, Brodsky considered Auden his artistic mentor and once called him the “greatest mind of the twentieth century.” Being ever and always individualistic, Auden put the highest premium on individual privacy and looked askance at excessive physical intimacy. Hence his ironic admonition to observe a thirty-inch danger zone in front of the poet's face – or else be prepared to face the consequences. But in our present context, Auden suddenly appears to masquerade as a proponent of social distancing.

Some thirty inches from my nose  
 The frontier of my Person goes,  
 And all the untilled air between  
 Is private *pagus* or demesne.  
 Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes  
 I beckon you to fraternize,  
 Beware of rudely crossing it:  
 I have no gun, but I can spit.

Anyway, in our troubled times it would certainly be wise to pay heed to the literary greats' piece of advice: they definitely knew what they were talking about.

## Procopius and the Plague in 2020<sup>1</sup>

*Geoffrey Greatrex, University of Ottawa*

At that time it was not easy to see anyone in Byzantium out in public; all those who were healthy sat at home either tending the sick or mourning the dead. (18) If one did manage to see a man actually going out, he would be burying one of the dead. All work was stopped; craftsmen abandoned all their crafts and every task which any man had in hand. (19) In a city with a remarkable abundance of good things a harsh famine ran riot. It seemed hard and indeed very worthy of note to have enough bread or anything else. As a result even to some of the sick the end of their life came to seem untimely because of the want of provisions. (20) To sum it up, it was quite impossible to see anyone dressed in a *chlamys* in Byzantium, especially when the emperor fell ill (for he too had a bubonic swelling); in the city that held the sovereignty over the whole Roman empire everyone was wearing clothes befitting private citizens and staying quietly at home.

Proc. *Wars* ii.23.17–20 (tr. Averil Cameron, rev. G. Greatrex)

Procopius' description of life in Constantinople, where he himself was living in spring 542, when the bubonic plague struck, strikes a resounding note today. As I write this article in Ottawa, Canada, I am still allowed to walk around the city, but I am prevented from going to my office at the university, while nearly all shops are shut; in many European countries, of course, the situation has been far more critical and restrictions correspondingly severe. It is not surprising therefore that an on-line Byzantine reading group recently chose to start its activities with a discussion of plague, citing a short extract from this very passage of Procopius.

It is perhaps a measure of the complacency of our western societies that the most recent trend in discussions of the Justinianic Plague, also referred to as the Early Medieval Pandemic (EMP), has been drastically to play down its impact. To take the case of Procopius in particular, Lee Mordechai, Merle Eisenberg, Timothy P. Newfield, Adam Izdebski, Janet E. Kay, and Hendrik Poinari suggested in 2019 in a leading American scientific journal that the plague was 'an inconsequential pandemic', arguing (amongst other points) that in Procopius, as in other sources, the plague did not take up much space – less than 1% of his work. Other data, e.g. concerning inscriptions and legislation, is also marshalled to show that the impact of the plague has been grossly overstated. This article is in fact just one in a flurry of recent publications by the first two authors among this collection – see the bibliography at the end – that, while offering a useful survey of recent scholarship in the field, aim to relativise the importance of the Justinianic plague. Much of this work comes from Princeton University, and it is not surprising therefore that another recent article, also by a panoply of scholars, in this case led by John Haldon, equally insists that one not overstate the importance of the plague.

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article appeared in Boletín 35 (2020) of the Sociedad Española de Bizantinística, to be found at <https://bizantinistica.blogspot.com/p/boletin.html>, alongside several other interesting contributions on plague in Byzantium. Since writing it, I have read a new paper by Mischa Meier (see Meier 2020) that makes many similar points.

But why this sudden tendency to downplay the 'Early Medieval Pandemic'? It is partly a natural scholarly reaction, of course, to a growing orthodoxy that traces many notable changes in the Late Antique period, whether demographic, social or religious, to the impact of the plague. The valuable synthetic work of scholars such as Lester Little and Peter Sarris, combined with the possibility of detecting traces of the DNA of *Yersinia pestis* in the teeth of plague victims, has encouraged a focus on the plague, its geography and its effects. The DNA evidence has revealed traces of the plague even beyond the regions already associated with the plague, such as Bavaria. At the same time, Mischa Meier has argued, both in German and, more recently in English, that the psychological impact of the plague – a subject of great interest to Procopius – on the Byzantine empire was considerable, resulting in, for instance, a great surge in the veneration of the Virgin Mary. This inference has likewise been contested, most recently by Kristina Sessa, who argues that wider factors were involved in the burgeoning cult of Mary.

The immediate trigger, however, for the recent spate of publications seeking to demonstrate the limited impact of the plague was a popular book by Kyle Harper entitled *The Fall of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*, which appeared in 2017. It is a wide-ranging survey of the various environmental and medical disasters that befell the empire, arguing that these constitute the true causes of the empire's collapse. It is worth quoting a couple of extracts to give a flavour of the book:

At scales that the Romans themselves could not have understood and scarcely imagined – from the microscopic to the global – the fall of their empire was the triumph of nature over human ambitions. (p. 4)

Even more consequentially, the Romans built an interconnected, urbanized empire on the fringes of the tropics, with tendrils creeping across the known world. In an unintended conspiracy with nature, the Romans created a disease ecology that unleashed the latent power of pathogen evolution. The Romans were soon engulfed by the overwhelming force of what we would today call emerging infectious diseases. The end of Rome's empire, then, is a story in which humanity and the environment cannot be separated. (p. 5)

Harper's book takes a strident determinist line, for which it has understandably drawn considerable fire, notably from Lee Mordechai and others. Yet the resonance of the extracts just quoted in today's context is striking. There is little doubt, it seems to me, that Harper goes to excessive lengths to support his maximalist thesis, in which nearly all change can be attributed at some level to environmental factors or infectious diseases; a trivial example of a dubious use of sources may be found at p. 206, where he quotes a passage on Procopius' astonishment at God's decision to allow Khusro to capture Antioch (ii.10.4) to make it seem as if he is referring rather to the plague. What is more, one wonders whether mobility within the Roman empire was necessarily greater than that which existed, for instance, in the archaic period, with the huge movement of Greek colonisation, not to mention Phoenician trading and colonising activities.

Nonetheless, perhaps partly because of its punchy prose, Harper's book is more likely to weather the present storm more successfully than the thesis put forward by his opponents. If we return to the article mentioned at the start of this contribution, it is amazing to think that one can build any sort of argument on bald statistics of space allocated to a particular topic in a particular author. True, Procopius describes the plague in just two chapters of the *Persian Wars* as well as alluding to it cursorily in the *Secret History* (where he asserts that it killed half the population, 18.44), which represents a small proportion of all his

works. But the problem here lies in this narrow quantification, a danger inherent in 'digital humanities': it is essential to *read* the texts and to grasp their importance. This point is well made in Mischa Meier's new article, it is worth noting. There is surely no doubt that Procopius' description of the plague is a *pièce de résistance* in his work, echoing Thucydides' earlier account of the plague in Athens. Both passages in turn exercised a great influence on later Byzantine writers, such as John Cantacuzenus and Critobulus of Imbros; Procopius' even left its mark on the *Megas Chronographos*. In other words, although it constitutes less than 1% of his writings, his account of the plague clearly left its mark, as he intended it to. One might compare it to the bold speech of Theodora at *Persian Wars* i.24.33-7, which is really quite short, but which continues to exercise an influence on our whole perception of the empress.

A few parallels with our current situation may be useful. If we were to measure somehow the sheer volume of coverage of the Covid-19 virus, whether in the normal media or social media, we would surely have to conclude that it is a massive event, causing huge demographic losses and widespread panic. And yet, at the moment of writing (11 May 2020), it has infected just over four million people worldwide, while some 283,500 have died from it. Around that number died in Constantinople alone during the first outbreak of the Early Medieval Pandemic, as Procopius and other sources indicate; even sceptics would accept this figure, although much depends on how populous we believe the city was, so that some would put it higher still. It should be immediately apparent that one should not jump to conclusions just because of the amount of attention an event attracts in the sources, particularly when we are dealing with periods for which source coverage is far from satisfactory. To claim that the EMP was 'an inconsequential pandemic' is surely needlessly provocative, but Harper's attempt to attribute almost every change to the pandemic or to environmental factors is equally suspect.

An important difference between Procopius' pandemic and our present situation lies in the nature of the plague: that of sixth-century Constantinople was immediately visible – to the point that one French scholar, Bruno Pottier, has suggested that the scars that Justinian bore from his contraction of the plague may be observed on some of his coins. Both Procopius and John of Ephesus provide detailed descriptions of the symptoms. With today's pandemic, the disease is almost invisible, making it all the more threatening. Because it can abruptly strike anyone and lay them low it engenders a fear out of proportion to the numbers actually involved. As the medical correspondent of the British journal *Private Eye* has observed, in winter 2018–19 there were 50,000 more deaths in England and Wales than expected, attributable to a harsh winter, austerity measures and seasonal respiratory viruses; yet this elicited little or no media comment, no doubt because it was almost exclusively the elderly and marginalised who were affected. In the western world we are reluctant to talk of death, but we are also very selective and even inconsistent in how we evaluate loss of life and threats to our health.

In general, the debate between maximalists and relativists had generated more heat than light; already in 2005 Peregrine Horden warned of this phenomenon in discussions of the EMP. Plague studies and collaboration between historians and scientists have attracted funding and popular attention: 'Roman Empire did not fall because of plague, study claims' was the headline in an article of *The Daily Telegraph* on 2 December 2019, reporting Mordechai's claims. In an age where 'hits' on websites count, researchers have every interest in exaggerating their claims to gain attention – whether to overplay the impact of the plague or to do the opposite. As so often, the truth surely lies somewhere in the (less exciting) middle: the plague accelerated tendencies, whether religious or cultural, that were already underway.

I would suggest that this is precisely what is happening in the world today. Already before the crisis civil liberties were being eroded as a result of the potential for increased surveillance offered by electronic means, while governments were steadily strengthening their control of society; meanwhile, the gulf between rich and poor has been constantly widening. With the appearance of such a threat to the population and widespread demands to take steps to counter it, however drastic, the state has been able to go further in its encroachments on private life than we would have envisaged possible only a few months ago. In this context, the article of Anthony Pouliquen of 2 April in *L'ardeur*, 'COVID-19, l'ami des dominants' (to be found at <http://www.ardeur.net/2020/04/covid-19-lami-des-dominants/>) is thought-provoking, even if it concentrates on the French situation. Moreover the poor, particularly in the U.S., have been much worse hit than the wealthy. One might even argue that our globalised world, in which there is such a massive volume of international trade alongside an increasing disparity of wealth within societies, provides ideal conditions for a pandemic; Justinian's bustling capital, to which ambassadors, petitioners and traders flocked from the Mediterranean world and beyond, likewise offered promising conditions for the spread of disease.

### Bibliography

I have divided this into those who play down the EMP's importance and those who prefer to see it as an important event (a wider category than 'maximisers'). Sessa's article is an interesting rejoinder to Harper with quite a broad focus. Sarris' short review of Harper's book is more balanced than that of Haldon et al., even if their much longer review goes into much more detail. I have included Stephen Mitchell's recent article because it is not as well known but is a useful synthesis on a particular region. Peter Sarris' recently published chapter is an excellent starting-point in the field from someone who has been reflecting on the plague for twenty years. Note that there is also now an app associated with the plague: <https://chri.princeton.edu/justinianic-plague-app>

### Those who play down the plague:

Haldon, J.F., Elton, H., Huebner, S., Izdebski, A., Mordechai, L., Newfield, T. 2018. 'Plagues, climate change, and the end of an empire: A response to Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome*', *History Compass* 16.12 (the third part is on the Justinianic plague).

Horden, P. 2005. 'Mediterranean Plague in the Age of Justinian', in Maas, M., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*. Cambridge: 134-60

Mordechai, L., and Eisenberg, M. 2019a. 'Rejecting catastrophe: the case of the Justinianic Plague', *Past and Present* 244: 3-50.

Mordechai, L., and Eisenberg, M. 2019b. 'The Justinianic Plague : an interdisciplinary review', *BMGS* 43: 156-80.

Mordechai, L., Eisenberg, M. et al. 2019. 'The Justinianic Plague: an inconsequential pandemic?', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, doi <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1903797116>

Sessa, K. 2019. 'The New Environmental Fall of Rome: A Methodological Consideration', *Journal of Late Antiquity* 12: 211-55.

### **Those who insist on the plague's importance:**

Harper, K. 2017. *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Princeton.

Little, L., ed. 2007. *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic of 541-750*. Cambridge.

Little, L. 2011. 'Plague historians in lab coats', *Past and Present* 213: 267-90.

McCormick, M. 2015. 'Tracking mass death during the fall of Rome's empire (I)', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 28: 325-57.

Meier, M. 2003. *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*. Göttingen.

Meier, M. 2016. 'The 'Justinianic Plague': the economic consequences of the pandemic in the eastern Roman empire and its cultural and religious effects', *Early Medieval Europe* 24: 267-92.

Meier, M. 2020. 'The 'Justinianic Plague': An "Inconsequential Pandemic"? A Reply', *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 55: 172-99.

Mitchell, S. 2018. 'The Great Plague of Late Antiquity in Asia Minor' in Şimşek, C. and Kaçar, T., eds., *The Lykos Valley and Neighbourhood in Late Antiquity*. Istanbul: 27-35.

Sarris, P. 2002. 'The Justinian effect: origins and effects', *Continuity and Change* 17: 169-82.

Sarris, P. 2018. Review of Harper in *American Historical Review* 123: 1627-9.

Sarris, P. 2020. 'Climate and disease', in Hermans, E., ed., *Companion to the Global Early Middle Ages*. Leeds: 511-37.

### **Other relevant work:**

Chouin, G. 2018. 'Reflections on plague in African history (14th-19th c.)', *Afriques* 9, <https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.2228>, esp. §§13-14 on the EMP, cf. §54 for some interesting remarks on the important work of Monica Green.

Pottier, B. 2010. 'L'empereur Justinien survivant à la peste bubonique', *Travaux et Mémoires* 16: 685-91.

## Women, Public Space and Covid-19

A research project hosted by the SRII



*Selda Tuncer is assistant professor of Sociology at Van Yuzuncu Yil University in Turkey and has been guest researcher at the Institute for Housing and Urban Research at Uppsala University in 2019–2020. She has previously worked as research assistant at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, where she completed her PhD on women's experiences of urban public space in Ankara during the 1950s and 1980s. Her dissertation was published last year by I. B. Tauris with the title Women and Public Space in Turkey: Gender, Modernity and the Urban Experience. She has published in both Turkish and English on issues relating but not limited to gender and space relations, urban culture and everyday life in Turkey. She has been recently working on the gendered transformation of public space and its effects on women's relationship with both public and private spaces in today's authoritarian conservative regimes.*

One of the decisive impacts of the corona outbreak is to shatter the organization of everyday life and, according to this, the formations of public and private realms. Preventive precautions taken against the spread of the virus has required withdrawal from public life and confinement to the domestic realm. Since the organization of life according to the public-private division has already been gendered in various ways, its collapse creates many negative outcomes for women which affect their lives severely now and the future. One of the greatest problems in this process is the growing of gender-based violence. As a result of quarantine and enforced periods of isolation, domestic violence is one of the most likely impacts of the pandemic. However, violence women are facing in these turbulent times is not limited to this. The safety of public spaces is another important issue because deserted streets, city centres, parks increase the risk of sexual violence and abuse by unknown men. This pandemic crisis is leading to an upsurge in violence against women in both private and public spaces of the urban environment.

Considering the urgency of this problem, to develop a gender analysis of the corona crisis from different aspects is critical. I want to examine how the corona outbreak causes the dissolution of the organization of everyday life, breaking the boundaries between public and private realms from a gender perspective. That is, I aim to analyze how the existing gendered formations of public and private realms are shuttered and relocated as a result of withdrawal from public spaces and confinement to the domestic realm. For that purpose, I will attempt to explore the questions: How do women's relationships with both private and public space change during this crisis? How do they perceive and experience personally this change in both spheres? What kinds of problems do they encounter as women in this time of great uncertainty and unsettlement, especially regarding violence and safety? What kinds of coping strategies do they develop?



In light of these questions, I want to focus on Turkey and Sweden. My aim is not a comparative analysis, but rather an analysis from a relational perspective which can foster exchange of knowledge and practices between two countries. Sweden and Turkey have different state politics, national ideologies and cultures. They also have different responses to the corona outbreak regarding their preventive measures. However, despite all these differences, women have also been experiencing similar problems, maybe in different forms and degrees, and developed various practices and strategies to cope with self-isolation, fear and violence. When looked at two countries in this crisis from a perspective of women's experiences, I believe that there is a fruitful ground where we can explore different gendered formations of public and private spaces and develop new and effective ways of combatting violence against women.

## Hubbub

– a series of Podcasts from the SRII!

### **Summer 2019**

*"Noch ist die Türkei nicht verloren"*: intervju med Ingmar Karlsson  
(Svenska, 40 minuter)

### **Autumn 2019**

*Kvinnoperspektiv på politik och samhälle*: intervju med Anna Ehrhart  
(Svenska, 20 minuter)

### **Winter 2020**

*Aspects of European Classicism and Orientalism*: lecture by Olof Heilo  
(English, 30 minutes)

### **Spring 2020**

*Women, Public Space and Covid-19*: interview with Selda Tuncer  
(English, 20 minutes)

<https://srii.org/pages/hubbub>

---

## Autumn lectures at the SRII

---

SRII / Zoom at 19:00 Turkish time, on the theme of

### LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

**Tuesday, October 20**

Anu Leinonen (Beirut)

*Struggling against language shift - Kurdish language activism in Turkey*

**Tuesday, November 3**

Memet Aktürk Drake (Uppsala)

*How does the integration context in different Western European countries impact bilingualism among second-generation Turks?*

**Thursday, November 12**

DIALOGLAR: Athena Farrokhzad, Helena Bani Shoraka, Yasemin Çongar, Tolga Cora

**Tuesday, November 24**

Haris Theodorelis Rigas (Istanbul)

*'Autochthony' performed: Greek as a public-space language in contemporary Istanbul*

**Tuesday, December 8**

Jenny Wallensten (Athen)

*Language, communication and Greek epigraphy: a material relationship*



Admission only after registration to [event@sri.org.tr](mailto:event@sri.org.tr) !

