"Oriental Plague" in the Middle Eastern Landscape: A Cautionary Tale

AARON SHAKOW
Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.;
e-mail: ashakow@post.harvard.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743810000875

As environmental history migrates to the Middle East there is natural excitement about new research methods such as molecular biology and soil science. But the Braudelian project of describing "man in his intimate relationship to the earth which bears and feeds him" may be complicated by echoes of the region's literary past.

Take, for example, the bacteriological theory of premodern bubonic-plague epidemics, discussed by Sam White in this issue of *IJMES*. It was an early exercise in Middle Eastern environmental history—at least, the Middle East and the environment both played starring roles. Fleas infected with the microbe Alexandre Yersin isolated in 1894 were said to have traveled in textiles like cotton or wool from the Islamic Mediterranean to the shores of western Europe, bringing death and buboes (lymphatic swellings) in their wake. Historians such as J.-N. Biraben went on to infer a "radical division" of the epidemiological system that included Europe and the Middle East into Christian and Muslim zones reinforced not just by climate and fauna but also by the fact that, until the 19th century, "Muslim populations and authorities refused the [quarantine] measures recommended in Europe."[1] Almost by definition, the price of "Oriental fatalism" was higher mortality, a contagious hazard to international commerce and society that rationalized the institutions of segregation.

At first glance this is just what environmental history ought to do: situate human culture and social behavior in a landscape of Gram-negative bacilli, marmot colonies, and arthropod vectors. But it may mistake literary artifacts for biological facts. Early modern records bear scant resemblance to epidemiological surveillance of the disease we now call bubonic plague. Before Yersin's microscope, medical observation was not robust enough to establish the essential similarity of case descriptions, let alone to demonstrate transmission chains across the Mediterranean. The word "plague" was therefore applied to diagnoses arbitrarily, drawing on ancient tropes of epidemic illness.

Some period physicians appear to have sensed that bubonic plague might be a construct. Shortly after Linnaeus published his *Species Plantarum* (1756), an Englishman in Syria pronounced plague unclassifiable. The symptoms were "scarcely in all respects alike in any two persons, and even vary extremely in the course of an hour in the same subject." He warned against mistaking "small biles" in the groin for so-called "marks of contagion."[2] At a time when plague was supposedly confined to the Ottoman Empire because its rulers and populace declined to adopt European practices, another doctor in London reported many fevers with "Buboes," "Carbuncles," "Petechiae," and "Spots." "When it spreads and turns epidemical and infectious," he added, "we call it the Plague."[3]

The Enlightenment project to include bubonic plague in medical taxonomies warrants critical inspection not just because diagnostic tools of the era fell short but also because

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743810000875 Published online by Cambridge University Press

plague was unlike any other illness. It was defined by legal consequences rather than symptoms. When a case of plague was announced, state agencies were empowered to quarantine individuals and populations. Drawing on biblical accounts of disease, their statutory authority *presumed* an association with the Middle East; this literary template was reinforced by diplomatic selection bias. Close on the heels of the Peace of Karlowitz, for example, France tried to shut its eastern border after a cluster of deaths in Dalmatia, but the rulers of Nice, Savoy, and Monaco refused to cooperate. It was quickly agreed that the outbreak had not been plague after all but only the *typhus des armées*. "The chosen land of the true plague is the Orient," wrote an official, "and it is mostly to the coast of the Orient that we should look."[4]

This is environmental history, but not as a study of human participation in larger ecosystems. Rather, it shows how ideas about biological causation enter the written record, as literature is made flesh by legally mandated diagnosis. A disease category whose symptoms are malleable but that can justify preventive detention, immigration control, customs enforcement, and interruption of all commerce with a given community is a powerful instrument. One 17th-century treatise accused Muslims of deliberately exporting pestilential merchandise to Europe. If they could not be invaded and massacred, a blockade should be imposed through which the Indo-Mediterranean trade routes would be replaced by the Atlantic circuit, "lands where Christians preach the Gospel, and where the entire kingdom is converted to the Christian faith."[5] The evidence for bubonic plague often seems on closer inspection to be a rehydration of old polemics in the new state-sponsored idiom of the population survey, filtered by very particular mercantile and diplomatic interests.[6] Biraben's "radical division" may be a phenomenon of words, not biology.

Now the broader importance of Middle Eastern environmental history comes into focus. Ottoman and North African rulers were looking at precisely the same terrain through a different legal and administrative lens. The documentary record produced by their subjects and officials lets us triangulate on what Jesuits in Syria reported to European consuls as "plague," generating a paper trail that stretched to the North Sea and beyond. At times, Ottomans apparently saw a ploy to undermine their commerce. Janissaries were banned from reporting death statistics to Europeans, and Ibn Sallum, the Ottoman state physician in the mid-1600s, denied that pestilence could pass from Cairo to Istanbul along the axis of the Ottoman economy.[7] Generally speaking, administrators seem to have regarded deaths recorded as plague by French and English diplomats as a sign of urban decay to be combated through provisionism and refurbished infrastructure.[8]

Patterns of mortality in the Middle East and Europe unquestionably diverged during the 18th century. Theories about what caused the "excess" deaths significantly affect our understanding of the period. A specifically Middle Eastern environmental history might take seriously the Ottoman and Bourbon localist position on epidemic disease. Soil analysis could help us estimate the incidence of enteric diseases in Ottoman cities and possible links to declining water or food quality. Osteology may suggest prevalence patterns for malaria, leishmaniasis, and lymphatic filariasis—diseases of development whose symptoms overlap with the ones caused by Yersin's bacillus—in port cities or floodplains reclaimed during the 16th-century cotton boom. But any correlation between causal models developed in the laboratory and "marks of contagion" in archives and libraries is tenuous.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743810000875 Published online by Cambridge University Press

NOTES

[1]Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays europeens et mediterranéeans*, vol. 1, *La peste dans l'histoire* (Paris: Mouton, 1975), 105–106, 109.

[2]Alexander Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for G. G. and J. Robinson, 1794), 2:350, 332–33, 333 n. 6.

[3]John Arbuthnot, *An Essay Concerning the Effects of Air on Human Bodies* (London: J. Tonson, 1733), 187–88.

[4]Quoted in Paul Gaffarel and Armand de Duranty, *La peste de 1720 à Marseille & en France, d'après des documents inédits* (Paris: Librarairie Academique, Perrin et Cie, 1911), 10–11.

[5]Fr. Maurice de Tolon, *Preservatifs et remedes contre la Peste, ov le Capvcin Charitable, Enseignant la method pour remedier aux grandes miseres que la Peste a coûtume de causer parmy les Peuples* (Paris: La veuve de Denys Thierry, 1668), 355–56.

[6]Aaron Shakow, "Marks of Contagion: The Plague, The Bourse, the Word, and the Law in the Early Modern Mediterranean, 1720–1762" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2009).

[7]Salih bin Nasrallah ibn Sallum al-Halabi, *Ghayat al-Itqan fi Tadbir Badan al-Insan*, §1.4.1.20, ed. Muhsin ʿAqil (Beirut: Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayḍaʾ, 1465/2004), 643.

[8]Nukhet Varlık, "Disease and Empire: A History of Plague Epidemics in the Early Ottoman Empire, 1453–1600" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008), 217–30.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743810000875 Published online by Cambridge University Press