middeleeuwse en vroegmoderne geschiedenis. *Honor, vengeance, and social trouble* is een stimulerend boek dat met veel kennis van zaken en met zichtbaar plezier is geschreven, dat laat zien dat meer waardering zonder meer op zijn plaats is.

Aart Noordzij, Universiteit Leiden

Nükhet Varlik, *Plague and empire in the early modern Mediterranean world: the Ottoman experience, 1347-1600* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 2015), 336 p., ill., krt., tbl., grf., €88,12
ISBN 9781107013384

Bacilli and bio-power in the early Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Turks embarked upon their territorial expansion roughly when the Second Plague Pandemic began to sweep across Eurasia. As local populations fell prey to *Yersinia pestis* and littoral and maritime traffic sputtered to a halt in the mid fourteenth century, these healthy mountain nomads – as some scholars have argued – took ruthless advantage of the situation and set themselves on a path to lasting political glory. The Ottomans' favorable constitution, as it turns out, is likely a myth; plague attacks and survives in mountainous regions as well as in plains and along the coast, then as now. Yet the link between state building and disease, as Nükhet Varlik's nuanced and wide-ranging study shows, does exist and is quite complex. In the early Ottoman case, the relationship was symbiotic rather than parasitical: plague buttressed political legitimacy and in some ways enabled the empire's growth, but the greater interconnectivity ushered by the Ottomans' activities in war and peace also enabled the spread of disease. This mutual dependency is epitomized by the history of early modern Istanbul, a resplendent imperial capital constantly beset by plague.

The book offers far more than a study of these relations, however. Part I expertly surveys the field of plague studies, including its medical, bio-archaeological, genetic, epidemiological and of course historiographical literature. To the non-expert working anywhere in late medieval or early modern Eurasia, this section would be extremely useful for catching up on the state of a dynamic and multidisciplinary field, which in the past two decades has provided unequivocal answers to some old questions (yes, Black Death was a plague pandemic) while raising new and fascinating ones, for instance regarding the relations between the microbiology of the plague bacillus and its changing environment. Indeed, few fields in premodern history regularly witness such fruitful debates between the humanities and natural sciences as in recent plague studies. Varlik moreover justly problematizes the construct of 'fatalistic Turks' (and by extension their empire) as a hygienic other in Euroamerican historiography, while taking Ottomanists to task for accepting a modernist (and by implication Eurocentric) paradigm in which governments' 'real' capacity for developing, let alone pursuing, public health policies was unthinkable prior to the nineteenth century. In doing so she provides an object lesson in how to interrogate simultaneously the accepted East/West and pre/modern divides.

Part II of the book ('Plague of Empire') is a careful reconstruction of plague's vicissitudes in the Ottomans' growing empire. It is mostly based on chronicle evidence (little if any per-

tinent DNA research has been carried out in this region), which collectively support the hypothesis that Ottoman territoriality played a major role in the creation, cessation and reorientation of disease hubs and vectors. Varlik posits three distinct phases (further divided into waves) for the period 1453-1600, and for each of them she draws a link between epidemiological patterns and the empire's internal dynamics of trade, settlement, conquest and urbanization. Thus, for instance, a second phase (1517-1570) is characterized by a broadening of a nearly exclusive west-east axis of transmission (e.g., Venice and Ragusa to Istanbul and vice versa, be it on land or by sea) to include a north-south path once the Ottomans completed their conquest of Mumluk Syria and Egypt. Given the constant presence of plague, each military and political move impacted the empire's population-level health, especially as regards those living and migrating to its flourishing urban centers.

Cultural, social as well as political historians of health may be particularly interested in the book's Part III ('Empire of Plague'). Here, using a broader array of sources but with a greater focus on Istanbul, Varlik analyses the diverse roles plague played in early Ottoman intellectual, religious and social life. For many historians of premodern European medicine these chapters summon a fresh encounter with familiar texts (sometimes in the Arabic from which they were translated into Latin) and less familiar debates due to their situation in an Islamic context, one in which the virtue of avoiding a contaminated city, for instance, could be challenged. Varlik wisely steers clear of essentializing early Ottoman attitudes or overemphasizing elite/popular and learned/folk cultural divides when it came to dealing with plague; the evidence for it is simply too patchy. Her main argument rather is that plague – whatever one made of it – was a presence in Istanbulis' lives and a regular challenge (or boon) for religious and political leaders. Small wonder then that the latter developed some mechanisms aimed at preserving population health, including the regulation of the urban environment. Evidence of officials' counting bodies at the city gates (also outside Istanbul) and registering causes of death among certain elites are particularly suggestive of government attempts to locate a city's position on a trajectory of plague mortality, a pattern they would have been tragically familiar with by the early sixteenth century.

There is, in sum, much to be gained from reading this timely publication, which inevitably leaves some questions unanswered. Were public health regulations, for instance (and as the book implies), mostly a reaction to plague's visitations? If so, how do we explain the rather significant delay from its 1347 onset to sixteenth-century responses? Political centralization doubtless played a key role, but it is unlikely that apathy reigned for most of the intervening period at least in some quarters and among some communities. Alternatively, if environmental regulations were not simply triggered by plague, what intellectual and especially urban administrative traditions could they build on, including existing Mamluk and Byzantine practices, not to mention the Islamic market inspectorate (*hisba*)? Answers or at least hypotheses about these connections will hopefully continue to enrich this important field, a field to which Varlik's book has now made a major contribution.

Guy Geltner, Universiteit van Amsterdam