

# Kalabalik!

*Bulletin of the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul*



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.

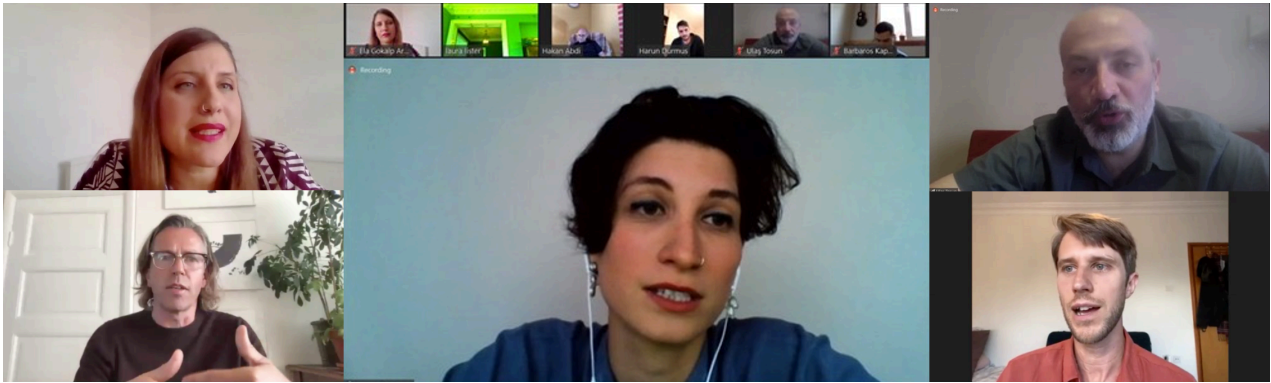
We felt very confused at first: what do you do with a research institute when you cannot receive fellows and organize events? But after a lot of thinking and long discussions, we are now getting back on our feet. We have organized two workshops by Zoom, one of translation and multilingualism in May, 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 Gökulp 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 Gökulp 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*

## Korona Günlerinde İstanbul

*Helin Topal, research officer, SRII*

Çin'den korona virüs haberleri gelmeye başlar başlamaz durumun ciddiyeti Türkiye kamuoyunda da konuşulmaya başlamıştı. Sağlık Bakanı 10 Ocak'ta konuyla ilgili bir Bilim Kurulu oluşturulduğunu açıkladı. Bu tarihten itibaren de korona virüs haberleri bütün haber kanallarında birinci sırayı almıştı bile. Henüz şubat ayının başında Türkiye Çin'le uçuş trafiğinin durdurulduğunu ilan etti. Daha sonra aynı karar İtalya, Güney Kore ve Irak için de geçerli oldu.

Mart ayının başında korona virüs ülkede konuşulan tek konu haline gelmişti. İlk korona vakası 11 Mart'ta açıklandı. Ertesi gün hükümet, 16 Mart Pazartesi gününden itibaren bütün ülkede okulların tatil edileceğini ilan etti. 23 Mart'tan itibaren televizyon ve internetten uzaktan eğitime başlanacağı belirtildi. Bu durum ilk etapta nisan ayı başına kadar geçerli olacaktı.

Tam da mart ayı başında biz de enstitümüzde bu yeni durum hakkında konuşmaya başlamıştık. Konu başkonsolosluğumuz ile de görüşüldü. Dezenfektan, ziyaretçilerin organize edilmesi ve virüs hakkında bilimsel verilerin paylaşılması gibi önlemleri başkonsoloslukla birlikte almaya başladık. Dürüst olmak gerekirse o günlerde işimize devam edebileceğimiz konusunda hala umutluyduk ancak sadece birkaç gün içinde durumu yeninden değerlendirmemiz gerektiğini anladık. İlk vaka açıklandığı gün biz de davetli etkinliklerimizi 16 Mart'tan itibaren iptal etmeye karar verdik. O tarihte enstitüde hali hazırda kalmakta olan akademisyenler için bir değişiklik söz konusu değildi bizim açımızdan.

16 Mart Pazartesi günü başka bir boyuta geçmiş ya da kötü bir filmin içine çekilmiş gibiydik bir anda. Hükümet aynı gün içinde bir dizi kararlar açıkladı. Toplu ibadetler yasaklandı. Sinemalar, kafeler, konser, spor ve düğün salonları kapatıldı. Uçuş yasağı kapsamına alınan ülke sayısı artırıldı. O gün açıklanan verilerde Türkiye'de 47 pozitif vaka vardı. Bu yeni durum karşısında biz de enstitüyü kapatma ve İstanbul'da bulunan akademisyenlerimizi evlerine gönderme kararı aldık. Müdürümüz Ingela Nilsson ve Müdür Yardımcımız Olof Heilo da İsveç'e gitmek için uçak biletlerini aldılar ve İsveç Araştırma Enstitüsü de evden çalışma sistemine geçti. Mayıs ayı başına kadar gelmesi planlanan bütün misafirlerimizle iletişime geçtik ve salgın dolayısıyla odalarını iptal etmek zorunda olduğumuzu bildirdik. Bir iki gün içinde zamanlamamızın ne kadar da isabetli olduğunu fark edecektik çünkü bütün dünyada sınırlar arka arkaya kapanmaya başlamıştı ve neredeyse herkes için "evde hayat" dönemi başlamıştı.

Ben, eşim, ilkokul birinci sınıfa giden oğlum ve bizimle aynı sokakta oturan 65 yaş üstü annem neredeyse üç aydır evde kapalıyız şimdi. Hepimiz için çok zorlayıcı bir süreç olduğunu itiraf etmeliyim. Ben ev ortamında işlerini yaparken, oğlum da uzaktan eğitimle öğrenimine devam ediyor. Profesyonel müzisyen olan eşim ise çalışmıyor







şu anda. Sadece ihtiyaç durumunda alışverişimizi yapmak için çıkıyoruz evden ve hayat şu anda İstanbul'da yaşayan pek çok kişi için bu şekilde devam ediyor. İlk başlarda insanlara sadece evde kalmaları önerilirken sonraları bu çeşitli yasaklarla sağlanmaya çalışıldı. İlk olarak halka açık toplantılar ve etkinlikler yasaklandı. Restoranların oturan müşteri almaları yasaklandı. Daha sonra 65 yaş üstü veya kronik hastalığı olanların sokağa çıkması yasaklandı. Parklar, sahil yolları, ormanlar ve tarihi yerler kapatıldı. Şehirlerarası ulaşım kısıtlandı ve nisan ayı başında tamamen durduruldu. Aynı zamanda 20 yaş altı bütün çocuk ve gençlere de dışarı çıkma yasağı geldi. Ülke genelindeki bütün alışveriş merkezleri kapatıldı. Sadece marketler, fırınlar, eczaneler, sağlık ocakları ve hastaneler hizmet vermeye devam etti. İlk genel sokağa çıkma yasağı 10 Nisan'da ilan edildi ve sadece o hafta sonunu kapsayacaktı. O tarihten itibaren de, ülkedeki korona

virüs vakaları artmaya devam ederken, haziran ayı başına kadar bütün hafta sonları ve resmi tatillerde sokağa çıkma yasakları ilan edildi. Bu arada İstanbul'un tüm Türkiye'deki korona virüs vakalarının %60'ına sahip olduğu bilgisini de eklemekte fayda var.

Ben evde kapalı kalmanın en çok çocuklu aileler ve ileri yaştakiler için zorlayıcı olduğunu düşünenlerdenim. Mayıs ayı ortalarında çocukların sadece çarşamba günleri ve 65 yaş üstünün de pazar günleri birkaç saat sokağa çıkmalarına izin verileceği açıklandı fakat tabi bu onların ihtiyaçlarını gidermekte yeterli olmadı. Her iki grup da hareket edememe ve sosyal ilişkilerden mahrum kalmaları dolayısıyla kendilerini iyi hissetmiyorlar açıkçası şu dönemde. Ayrıca Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı okulların 31 Ağustos'a kadar açılmayacağını da açıkladı bu süreçte. Bu da çocuklu ailelerin üç ay daha çocuklarını sosyal mesafeyle oyalamaları gerektiği anlamına geliyor ki bu hiç de kolay değil.

Mayıs ayı sonlarında toplumda normalleşme tartışmaları oldukça büyümüştü. Hükümetin korona virüs önlemlerinde tartışılan hep iki ana başlık vardı; sağlık ve ekonomi. Genel anlamda toplumdaki algı sağlık sisteminin bu süreçte iyi işlediği yönünde. Burada özellikle Türkiye'de yoğun bakım ünitesi olan hastane sayısının çokluğu ve büyük bir "sağlık ordusu" olmasının önemi büyüktü. Tıp fakülteleri Türkiye'nin en iyi eğitim veren fakülteleri arasındadır hala. Yoğun bakım ihtiyacı olan hastalara yer bulma konusunda zorluk yaşanmadı. Ayrıca Sağlık Bakanı da yaptığı günlük basın açıklamalarındaki sakin tavrı ve sorulara cevap veriş şekliyle toplumda sempati topladı. Fakat salgın sürecinde ekonomik anlamda alınan sokağa çıkma yasağı kararları,

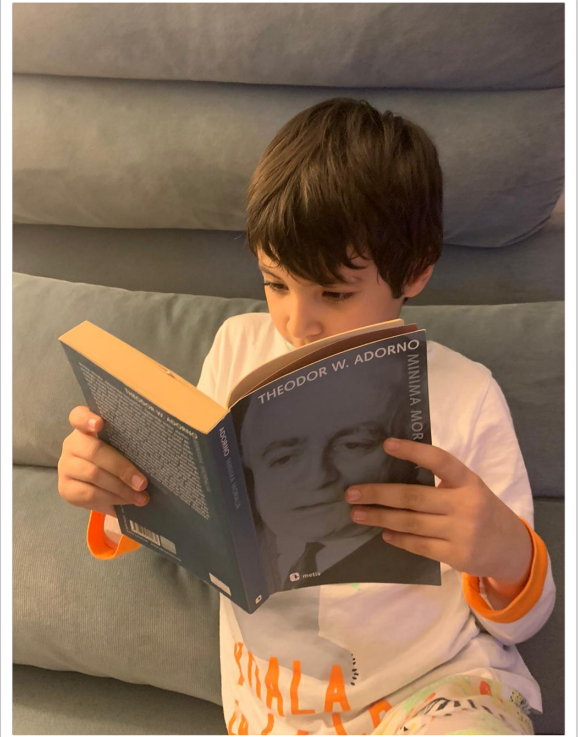


işini kaybedenlere veya iş yerlerini kapatmak zorunda kalanlara destek verilmesi gibi kararlar toplumun büyük bir kısmı tarafından aynı şekilde olumlu geri dönüşler almadı. Bir takım ekonomik yardım paketleri açıklandı ancak aynı zamanda da gelirlerini kaybeden vatandaşlara dağıtmak için bir yardım kampanyası başlatıldı. Bu kampanya büyük eleştiri aldı. Muhalefet partileri tarafından yönetilen bazı büyükşehir belediyelerinin de ihtiyaç sahiplerine dağıtmak üzere başlattıkları yerel kampanyaların hükümet tarafından engellenmesi gerginliklere sebep oldu. Bilim Kurulu'nun seyahat kısıtlaması ve sokağa çıkma yasakları gibi önlemlerin devam etme tavsiyelerine karşın toplumun ekonomik zorluklar yaşayan değişik kesimlerinden sesler yükselmeye devam etti. Bütün bu tartışmaların sonunda 1 Haziran itibariyle kısıtlamaların çoğunun kaldırılmasına karar verildi. Türkiye'nin 1 Haziran günü itibariyle vaka sayısı 164 769, vefat sayısı 4 563 ve iyileşen hasta sayısı 128 947 olarak açıklanmıştı. Toplum kişisel hijyen önlemlerini alma ve sosyal mesafeyi koruma konusunda dikkatli olmaya devam etmesi yönünde uyarılarak şehirlerarası ulaşım kısıtlaması ve sokağa çıkma yasakları kaldırıldı.

Bu yeni kararlar pek çok grup tarafından sevinçle karşılanırsa da endişe hala devam ediyor. 20 milyondan fazla insanın yaşadığı İstanbul gibi bir şehirde sosyal mesafeyi korumak kolay değil. Özellikle de o kadar uzun süre evde kapalı kalmak zorunda kalan insanlar bir anda kendini sokağa attı Haziran. Hala evde kalmaya devam eden ve mesafeyi koruyan pek çok insan var ama her gün dışarıda hareket halinde olan milyonlar da var. Yazlıklarına ve memleketine giden insanların virüsü başka şehirlerde de yaymaya başladığını gelen haberlerden öğreniyoruz. "Yeni normal hayata" geçişimizden 15 gün sonra günlük vaka sayıları tekrardan 1 500'ü geçmeye başladı ve şimdiden alınabilecek yeni önlemlerden bahsediliyor.

Salgınla geçirdiğimiz üç ay ve bu metni bitirmek için yaptığım pek çok deneme sonunda anlıyorum ki bu hikâyenin sonuna henüz gelmedik. Her gün yeni bir duruma uyanıp, her türlü uzmandan yeni öneriler dinliyoruz. Hayatın normale döneceğine inanmayı her şeyden çok istiyoruz fakat endişe umutlarımızı gölgeliyor. Ekonominin büyük bir krize gireceğini öngören pek çok uzman var. Dükkanlar, kafeler, restoranlar ve oteller kapılarını açmış olsalar da insanlar buralara gitmenin güvenli olduğu konusunda hala tereddütlü. Kültür sektörü en ağır darbeyi alan sektörlerden bir tanesi ve yakın zamanda onlar için normalleşme öngörülüyor. İşsizlik arttı ve maalesef iş arayanlar için yeni iş olanakları yakın gelecekte görünmüyor. Şimdiden salgında ikinci dalga konusu konuşuluyor sürekli. Ama insanoğlunun hayatta kalma yeteneği inanılmaz büyük ve hayat devam ettiği sürece de yeni normaller bulmaya ve uyum sağlamaya devam edecek.

15 Haziran 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/bocker/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://cchri.princeton.edu/justinianic-plague-app>

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# Siri the Viking

by Patric Nyström & Per Demervall



*It is spring, and the Vikings are preparing to set sail for Miklagard. But Siri is told she has to stay behind! Her Dad, the chieftain, says that the journey is too dangerous for a little girl. But if he thinks that is going to stop her, he's wrong. She stows away on his ship. Aboard the same ship is a mysterious box meant to be delivered to the emperor himself...*

With its fast-paced plot, well-researched illustrations and a tough little girl as its main character, Siri the Viking is a great read for all ages. It tells a story about medieval cross-cultural encounters – the kind of story that needs to be heard more often these days.

Siri's adventures have previously been published in Swedish, but two of the albums now appear in English for the first time: *The Emperor's Treasure* and *Mimir's Well*. Stevali förlag, 86 pages.

[www.amazon.de/-/tr/dp/1908233281/](http://www.amazon.de/-/tr/dp/1908233281/)

## Visit from the Vikings

### *Meeting with Per Demervall and Patric Nyström*

In februari 2020, the institute hosted Per Demervall and Patric Nyström, the creators of *Siri the Viking*, a series of comic books about a Viking girl who befriends a Byzantine prince during a trip to Miklagard (Constantinople) around the 9th century. As a script writer, Patric has previously been involved in the comic adaptation of a Swedish classic about the Viking age, *The Long Ships* by Frans G. Bengtsson, whereas Per as artist has transformed August Strindberg's *The Red Room* into a comic.

#### **What inspired you to make a comic about a Viking girl in Miklagard?**

Patric: When we got the task to create a new comic, we almost immediately decided it would be about a girl, and for two reasons: we both have daughters, and there aren't many adventure comics with girl protagonists. Once we had settled upon the Viking age, it was easy to conclude that the cast would have to journey, like the Vikings did, to Miklagard and trade there.

#### **Which material has inspired your depictions of Miklagard / Constantinople?**

Per: In order to draw Miklagard / Constantinople, I have trawled the internet for references pictures to use as templates, and my fantasy has done the rest. I always make thorough research for historical comics.

Interview: Ingela Nilsson



*Siri left a message in our guest book.*



A VIKING NAMED HALVDAN ONCE CARVED SOME RUNES INTO THE HAGIA SOPHIA CATHEDRAL IN ISTANBUL. YOU CAN STILL SEE THEM THERE, A THOUSAND YEARS LATER!

WAS HE HOMESICK FOR THE NORTH? OR WAS HE JUST BORED? THE WORLD MAY NEVER KNOW.





## 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>

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## Autumn lectures at the SRII

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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) !

