

TELLING TIMES: MEMORIES OF CULTURE, CULTURES OF MEMORY

Lecture Series 2021



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(University of South Carolina & Rutgers University-Newark)

“Plagued Legacies: Rethinking Black Death Narratives”

We are currently experiencing one of the most disruptive pandemics in modern history. The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in nearly 100 million confirmed cases and more than two million deaths globally. Where we stand now, it is still uncertain how many it will infect or kill worldwide, how long it will continue, and when life will return to normal. What we know for sure is that this is a pivotal moment and that we are experiencing a historic event that will transform our societies both profoundly and irreversibly. As we wade into this new age of pandemics, it is critical to rethink how we write the history of pandemics. With a conviction that the past

helps us to understand the present and that the present should help us to rethink the past, I turn to the legacy of past plagues.

In this presentation, I will take stock of the lasting legacies of past plagues because they continue to shape the way we think about new pandemics. In particular, I will address persistent problems, such as European exceptionalism, triumphalism, and epidemiological Orientalism, that are not only ubiquitous in plague studies, but also staples of public opinion about pandemics, past and present.

Nükhet Varlık is Associate Professor of History at the [University of South Carolina](#) and [Rutgers University–Newark](#). She is a historian of the Ottoman Empire interested in disease, medicine, and public health. She is the author of [Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600](#) (2015) and editor of [Plague and Contagion in the Islamic Mediterranean](#) (2017). Her new book project, “Empire, Ecology, and Plague: Rethinking the Second Pandemic (ca.1340s-ca.1940s),” examines the six-hundred-year Ottoman plague experience in a global ecological context. In conjunction with this research, she is involved in developing

the [Black Death Digital Archive](#) and contributing to multi-disciplinary research projects that incorporate perspectives from palaeogenetics (ancient DNA research in particular), bioarchaeology, disease ecology, and climate science into historical inquiry. She is the Editor of the [Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association](#) (JOTSA).



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