

## Studying the Transmission of Epidemics via the Maritime Silk Road in the Novel *Nights of Plague*

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The purpose of this study is to examine the descriptions of the transmission of plague along the Silk Road in Orhan Pamuk's 2022 novel *Nights of Plague*. Pamuk won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2006, the first prize for Turkish literature. Pamuk's vast knowledge of epidemiological history, which has long fascinated him, comes to life in this novel as he describes the characters' battles against the plague in the East and West and how the plague was brought to the islands and spread along the Maritime Silk Road. One of the most important trade routes in human history, the Silk Road was not only a link between East and West trade and cultures but also a route for the transmission of bubonic plague during the medieval period onwards. It was this epidemic that contributed to the decline of the Silk Road. In the novel, a plague originating in China strikes the Ottoman coastal cities of Smyrna and Mingheria on its way to Europe via India. The epidemic is contained in Smyrna but the death toll spirals out of control when the plague reaches the island of Mingheria by sea. The spatial setting of the novel is an island, which means that it communicates with the outside world by sea. The only way the plague could have spread to an isolated island was by ship. Rats from different ports and ships would have traveled to other parts of the world or even countries to spread the plague. In *Nights of Plague*, the fact that the plague reached Mingheria via the maritime Silk Road is also proven by the route of the ships and various narratives. The novel confirms what many scholars have argued, that the Silk Road brought various goods from the East to the Roman Empire, along with deadly diseases, and that the sea routes were an important way for the plague to travel and spread.

**Keywords:** overland Silk Road, Maritime Silk Road, Ottoman Empire, transmission of disease, plague, Orhan Pamuk, *Nights of Plague*

## Introduction

Epidemics have been two sides of the same coin throughout human history. We know from history that humanity's sophisticated social habits led to the invention of cities and that epidemics that broke out in densely populated cities had devastating consequences. Some of the most famous examples include the bubonic plague, which killed 30 to 40 percent of Europe's population in the 14th century; smallpox, which was one of the reasons for the decline of the Aztec and Inca empires; and the Spanish flu, which killed 50 million people after the First World War. The world has recently experienced COVID-19. The world's recent experience of COVID-19 naturally reminds us of these pandemics that once ravaged the globe.

There have been many novels about the pandemic in the field of literature, which is an art form that reflects the times and the state of society and reality. *Nights of Plague* (2021) by Orhan Pamuk, the first pandemic novel to be published after the outbreak of COVID-19, is a fictionalized account of the chaos caused by a plague outbreak, using real people, historical facts, and the author's imagination. His earlier novels, such as *Silent House* (1983) and *The White Castle* (1985), also depicted the landscape of Istanbul during the plague epidemic against the backdrop of the Ottoman Empire. In other words, Pamuk has been interested in infectious diseases for 40 years and has been researching and exploring the subject intensively for the past 10 years, according to an interview with Korean media. As such, the novel *Nights of Plague* tells the story of a plague outbreak on the island of Mingheria in the eastern Mediterranean in 1901, from beginning to end, through the eyes of characters with different religious, social, and political interests. Pamuk's vast knowledge of the history of the plague, which has long been a fascination to him, is evident in this work, as he describes the characters' battles against the plague in the East and West, vividly illustrating how the disease was brought to the island by sea and how it spread.

As one of the most important trade routes in human history, the Silk Road became an important pathway for the intellectual exchange of goods and culture, knowledge, religion, thought, technology, and the spread of art between the East and West. However, in addition to connecting East and West economically and culturally, the Silk Road also became a route for transmitting the bacteria that some scientists believe caused the plague. The spread of the epidemic played a role in its decline. Taking the Ottoman Empire, the novel's geographical setting, as an example, the plague reached Istanbul between 1453 and 1517 via the Maritime Silk Road. This route covered the Balkan and European ports on the Mediterranean, including Venice. Specifically, the plague was transmitted through various ports by rats on board merchant ships engaged in maritime trade (Parıldar 2020, 22-23). Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the transmission of epidemics through the Maritime Silk Road in

*Nights of Plague*, which describes how the plague was spread by rats brought into the Ottoman Empire by sea and, in particular, how Muslims on the island of Mingheria who traveled to the holy city by boat were considered plague carriers and were prevented from entering the island and quarantined at sea. This study aims to refocus on the historical fact that the Maritime Silk Road and the overland Silk Road were major routes for spreading the plague through the novel *Nights of Plague*.

## The History of Epidemics and the Literature on Epidemics

One of the greatest epidemics to threaten humanity in history was the Athenian Plague in the 5th century BCE. In 430 BCE, as Athens and Sparta, the leading city-states of ancient Greece, battled for supremacy, a plague suddenly broke out in the victorious Athenian city, killing a quarter of the Athenian soldiers and civilians and leaving Athens defeated. The cause of the plague is still unknown and DNA analysis of corpses from the time has led to the theory that it was typhoid fever. Researchers believed that Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy, originated in Egypt around 2400 BCE and spread through the Middle East to Europe and China. However, modern genetic studies indicate that leprosy originated in ancient China as the oldest genetic strains of leprosy are from China (Benjak *et. al* 2018, 3).

Once a major epidemic in the Roman Empire around the 6th century CE, the plague reached its full potential in medieval Europe in the 14th century. The catastrophe began in 1347 when the Mongols, attempting to seize the Genoese city of Caffa, took the bodies in the field of plague victims and shot them into Caffa with catapults. It is said that the Mongols did this to demoralize the Europeans. However, just six years after this event, 30 million people across Europe died of the plague. That is a third of Europe's population at the time. The plague hastened the fall of medieval feudalism and paved the way for the rise of Western Europe.<sup>1</sup> There are many theories about the spread of the plague. However, the most well-known version is that it was brought to China from the Manchurian and Mongolian steppes in 1331 and over the next 16 years traveled along the trade route known as the Silk Road to India and the Islamic world, eventually reaching Crimea in southern Ukraine in 1347 (McNeill 2019, 186). However, according to Monica Green "the plague events of either central or eastern Asia are dated to as little as a decade or so before the events several thousand kilometers away, in the Caucasus and Crimea" (Green 2020, 1602). The plague would have been transported by ship to various ports, where it would have spread inland, eventually reaching almost all of Europe and the Middle East

Similarly, cholera is an infectious disease that spread globally with the rise of industrialization in the 19th century. In 1817, cholera bacteria were brought to Calcutta by British ships and swept through India, spreading to the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, killing hundreds of thousands of people. By the 1830s, it had spread to Egypt, England,

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the history of the plague and folk remedies, see Wright (2020, 38-62).

Canada, the United States, and Mexico. In Britain, it killed 100,000 people (Cho Chongdo 2020). Additionally, the first influenza pandemic of the 20th century swept the globe for two years from 1918, killing an estimated 50 million people. The Spanish flu is thought to have originated in American barracks during the First World War and spread around the world as soldiers traveled. It was first recognized on the French front but was reported in the Spanish media, hence the name “Spanish flu.”

Nevertheless, these do not compare with the plague, an epidemic of epic proportions that reduced the population of Europe by a fifth in a matter of years and finally brought the 1,000-year-long Middle Ages to an end. Not surprisingly, the plague has been the subject of several literary works (Lee Söhu 2020). For example, Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, considered to be the beginning of the modern novel, tells the story of ten men and women who gather in a villa on the outskirts of Florence to escape the plague and tell a total of 100 stories, one a day for ten days, to ease the anxiety of not knowing when they might fall ill. The Black Death originated in China, landed in Sicily in 1347, and quickly swept across the European continent. In 1348, the plague reached Florence and quickly devastated the thriving city. Boccaccio, who lived in the city, describes the disease in the opening pages of his *Decameron*, where the sputum rises, and the spots spread, killing within four days. Even more terrifying than the disease, which took lives without warning, was the widespread distrust and moral apathy among the people. In the preface to the novel, Boccaccio laments that people have become suspicious of each other and desensitized to the death of their own children. However, his harrowing experience inspired him to write an immortal work of literature, the *Decameron*, written between 1349 and 1351 during the plague epidemic.

Plagues also appear in the *Oedipus* myth. Suddenly, an unexplained epidemic begins to spread through Thebes, which has long enjoyed peace and tranquility, killing people in an instant and turning the peaceful city into a city of death. Oedipus desperately prays to the temple and the Oracle of Delphi tells him that the plague in Thebes is caused by the anger of the gods against men who have violated their ethics and that the plague will only be calmed if the murderer of the deceased king, King Laius, is found and punished. Furthermore, Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* addresses issues of discrimination surrounding the epidemic, and Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* uses the London slums to denounce the poverty and inequality caused by capitalism. In contemporary literature, Portuguese novelist João Saramago’s novel *Blindness* explores a city where a blinding virus has spread. Meanwhile, in Korean literature, *Choryongga* is a famous work of literature that responds to plague and epidemics. In this song, the plague, or epidemic, was probably a viral or bacterial disease such as smallpox, typhoid, or malaria (Jeong 2022, 109). More recently, in contemporary literature, Hye-young Pyun’s (2018) *City of Ash and Red* tells the story of a man’s survival in a plague-ridden, garbage-ridden, rat-infested city. Lastly, Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague* is one of the most important works in world literature to use the plague as a central theme. The novel describes man’s escapism, selfishness, and resistance in the face of the plague. Camus emphasizes the need for citizens to work together in the face of the plague and the need for solidarity under challenging circumstances.

## The Narrative of the Novel *Nights of Plague*

In an interview with the Korean media, Orhan Pamuk was asked how his novel differs from Camus's *The Plague*. He replied, "The Plague is not really a realistic novel about the plague or about epidemic prevention...The Plague is a very beautiful allegorical novel that describes the Nazi occupation of France..." (Pak Tongmi 2022). In contrast, his novel *Nights of Plague* is a realistic pandemic novel that graphically depicts the plague situation. Overall, *Nights of Plague* is a historical novel based on letters written by the fictional character Sultan Pakize to her older sister, Hatice, about the events that took place on the island of Mingheria in the Ottoman Empire. Both Sultan Pakize and Hatice are fictional daughters of actual royalty named Murat, the 33rd Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The narrator, historian Mina Mingher, explains in the introduction that she has collected the letters of her great-grandmother, Sultan Pakize, and used them to novelize the history of the island of Mingheria since 1901. The island of Mingheria is located in the eastern Mediterranean Sea between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Greece (1873-1979).

In the story, an outbreak of plague happens on the island of Mingheria in 1901, during the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which is the third plague epidemic.<sup>2</sup> Originating in China, the plague strikes the Ottoman coastal cities of Smyrna and Mingheria on its way to Europe via India. Abdul Hamid II, then Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, sends the Christian Bonkowski Pasha and his assistant Ilyas, an imperial chemist and quarantine expert, to end the plague. However, before they can implement their quarantine policy, Bonkowski Pasha is mysteriously murdered. To solve the murder and end the plague on the island, Padishah sends a new quarantine specialist, Murat V's daughter, Pakize Sultan, and her husband, Prince Consort Doctor Nuri, who are traveling as part of a delegation to China. Their bodyguard, the Major, accompanies them.

Arriving on the island of Mingheria, Doctor Nuri discovers that an epidemic of the plague has already begun and attempts to implement a series of quarantine measures and find other ways to stop it. However, he is hampered by the people's lack of understanding of the plague and the incompetence of the administration in charge of the epidemic. Governor Mingheria, who denies the existence of plague on the island at the beginning of the epidemic and delays the implementation of quarantine measures, merchants who violate quarantine measures to make a living, and Muslims who refuse to disinfect corpses with lime according to Islamic tradition and hide their plague infection to avoid going to quarantine facilities make the plague spread even faster.

Most of the island's Rum<sup>3</sup> inhabitants and wealthy Muslims desperately flee the island, creating a gap in the quarantine, and the remaining Christians and Muslims are at odds, each

<sup>2</sup> The first plague pandemic was called the Justinian Plague and occurred from 541 to 542 CE across the Eastern Roman Empire, the Sasanian Empire, and the Mediterranean coast; the second was in 14th- to 19th-century Europe, just before the Renaissance; and the third was in the 19th- to 21st-century, occurring in China in 1855 and also taking a heavy toll in India.

<sup>3</sup> Rum is a term used to describe of a Greek ethnicity living in the Ottoman Empire.

accusing the other of being a hotbed of the plague. Meanwhile, Bonkowski Pasha's assistant, Ilyas, dies of a mysterious poisoning. Under pressure from Western powers concerned about the spread of the plague to Europe, Abdul Hamid II mobilizes British, French, and Russian warships to blockade the island of Mingheria. The people of Mingheria realize that the island has been sealed off and fear grips them.

Meanwhile, the Major, a native of the island, marries a beautiful maiden, Zeynep, who was also born and raised on the island, and takes on the role of organizing and commanding the island's quarantine force. After taking over the post office and cutting off the telegraph in the name of stopping the spread of the plague while clashing with Ramiz, the brother of Sheikh Hamdullah, the leader of the island's most influential Islamic sect, the Halifiye tekke, who had been inciting Muslims to disobey the quarantine measures, he declares an independent state and becomes its first president. The hope of a new government is short-lived when the Major and his wife fall victim to the plague and Sheikh Hamdullah takes power. He abandons all previous quarantine policies and the plague spreads unchecked across the island of Mingheria. Sheikh Hamdullah dies of the plague and Sultan Pakize is crowned queen. The strict quarantine measures of the Sultan's regime end the epidemic and the island is freed from the horrors of the plague.

Thus, *Nights of Plague* is a disaster novel that depicts a world in the throes of an epidemic, which also has a rich political and social context of revolution, independence, and the birth of nations. It is a magnum opus that reveals the literary aesthetic of an author who conceived the novel 40 years ago and began writing it before the pandemic. Rather than focusing on depicting the fear of the epidemic itself, the novel focuses on the confusion and reaction of people in the face of the epidemic, reminding us of the self-evident truth that the epidemic is a test of humanity (Han Sobõm 2022). In doing so, the author offers readers an opportunity to reflect on our modern lives in the face of a new 21st-century pandemic and to diagnose our society's response to it.

### **The Maritime Silk Road As a Plague Transmission Channel in *Nights of Plague***

Since the beginning of time, mankind has been playing a game of survival against infectious diseases and pathogens such as viruses and bacteria. They have been constantly evolving into diseases, such as SARS (2002), MERS (2015), and the recently declared COVID-19 pandemic. The main causes of the spread of these infectious diseases are wars and the movement of people and goods by land and sea. Likewise, people from the East and West have been interacting through land and sea trade routes, e.g. the Silk Road, since before Christ. For example, paper and printing, gunpowder, and magnetic compasses were developed in China and brought to the West via the Silk Road. Unfortunately, diseases also came from China, including the plague that spread to Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, in 542 CE. After the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453 and blockaded the

trade routes, countries such as Portugal on the Atlantic coast established maritime trade routes around the southern tip of the African continent (Crofton and Black 2016, 145-146).

As mentioned above, the Silk Road was not only a trade route for goods but also a conduit for religion and ideas. Early on, it was instrumental in bringing Buddhism from India and later Islam from West Asia to Southeast Asia via India. At the end of the 15th century, the Age of Exploration, a turning point in world history, saw European powers flock to Southeast Asia, vying for control of the region's spice trade, opening routes to India and Southeast Asia and subsequently occupying parts of the region. First, the Portuguese and Spanish, then the Dutch, and finally, the English competed in Southeast Asia. Spain, in particular, engaged in a triangular trade, bringing silver from Mexico and buying Chinese silk and porcelain from the Philippines. The ocean was ripe for global trade.

As such, the Maritime Silk Road brought Southeast Asia's precious goods to market. It brought people from India, China, and Europe to the region, spurring colonization. The same was true for Southeast Asian countries, which became wealthy by controlling maritime trade. South American crops such as coffee and rubber trees were brought to Southeast Asia for the plantations that were eventually made possible by the development of sea routes. The Maritime Silk Road was a crossroads of civilizations, beginning with the trade of commodities and ending with the movement of people, a maritime network that spanned the globe and made Southeast Asia what it is today (Kang Hūijōng 2023).

For a long time, the Islamic forces monopolized the monsoon sea routes. However, some Europeans began to take an interest in these routes too. They wanted to bring pepper from India to Europe by sea rather than by land. Europe's desire for spices spurred the development of sea routes between Europe and Africa and between India and Indonesia. However, beyond the supply of spices, what other impact did sea routes have on human history? While the overland Silk Road was an extensive global network linking China to Rome by land, the Maritime Silk Road was a global network linking Europe to Africa and India to Southeast Asia. Like the overland Silk Road, the maritime routes moved people, traded goods, exchanged knowledge and ideas, and spread religion.

Just as the overland Silk Road brought silk, tea, pottery, and other goods to the Roman Empire, so did the Maritime Silk Road carry and spread deadly diseases (Kim 2020, 40-41). This means that the maritime Silk Road, like the overland Silk Road, became an important route for spreading infectious diseases. History has proven that ships and goods brought to port cities by sea were the main culprits in the spread of infectious diseases. For example, in 541 CE, a deadly plague that spread from Constantinople first hit Pelusium in northeastern Egypt, which was a port city that shipped grain to the Roman Empire (Kim 2020, 44). With so many people flocking to trade and transport various goods, the epidemics that broke out in these port cities were deadly.

It is no coincidence that Albert Camus chose the port city of Oran as the setting for *The Plague*. "At first glance, Oran is actually just another 'normal city,' a French surveillance center on the Algerian coast of Algeria" (Camus 2021, 11). A port city is a place where ships come and go and although *The Plague* is set in the 1940s, rather than the early 1900s as *Nights*

*of Plague* is, the time setting is not important. What is important is that both novels are set on islands or in port towns surrounded by the sea. Both ended with the ports being opened after the plague was over, confirming that sea routes were the way the plague spread.

The spread of the epidemic was closely linked to transport so it quickly spread from the Middle East to other parts of the world. The new sailing ships developed in Europe during this period quickly infected the major European ports. The network of trade routes was also very well connected to the Mediterranean and northern Europe, which allowed the bubonic plague to move from port to port (Lee 2005, 43). As the plague had also spread from the Black Sea to Europe via the ships of Genoese merchants and likewise during the “voyages of discovery” by Europeans to the New World in the 16th century, which led to similar tragedies. (Crofton and Black 2016, 196-197). Technically, plague, caused by the plague bacillus, is an infectious disease that occurs in voles in the wild and is transmitted to humans by house mice and black rats. The mouse was originally native to the regions of India and Pakistan but spread to other parts of the world via ships traveling the oceans. Eventually, they traveled by ship to Constantinople, the center of the Byzantine Empire.

The novel *Nights of Plague* also reveals that rats spread the plague. Between 1876 and 1914, there were numerous epidemics along the pilgrimage route and the author includes one of these events in the novel. This is the “Hajj mutiny” mentioned in Chapter 15 of the novel. At that time, pilgrims traveled to Mecca by ship. On their way back, they stopped at several ports, where they contracted the plague from rats that moved freely between ships and ports. The novel also reveals that the plague was brought to the island of Mingheria by rats aboard the ship *Aziziye*. “Some people say the plague arrived on the *Aziziye*! With rats that got onto the rowboat” (Pamuk 2022, 150).

Since rats live in harbors and on ships, it is clear that they are the primary carriers of the plague. Dr. Nuri, the quarantine officer on the island of Mingheria, follows the path of the rats to discover how the plague spread from the port to the city. “That day the Doctor and Prince Consort used the map to show the other doctors and Governor how the outbreak had spread from the harbor to the rest of the city at the same time velocity as the advance of the rats” (Pamuk 2022, 295). In other words, rats from ships docked in the harbor were the main vectors of plague transmission and the quote above confirms this fact. Moreover, it didn’t take long for the *Aziziye* to be identified as coming from Alexandria:

The disease had entered Arkaz through the Old Stone Jetty. Using the map, Quarantine Master Nikos had tracked the advance of the microbe and established that the ship that had brought the plague must have been the Greek cargo barge *Pilotos* which had come from Alexandria...Having arrived on the island upon this ship, the disease had then nestled in nearby Muslim neighborhoods, particularly in Vavla, Kadirler, Germe, and Çite (Pamuk 2022, 293).

Alexandria was a major hub for Mediterranean trade, linking the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, and had long served as an outpost for trade to the East.



The novel suggests that ships sailing from this trading port to Mingheria introduced and spread the plague. When it became clear that ships were the source of the plague, Mingheria's quarantine authorities imposed a quarantine on all ships from around the world:

It was further decided that starting first thing in the morning two days after the date of this quarantine meeting, all vessels arriving from Alexandria, the northern shores of Africa, the Suez Canal, nearby Islands, and the East would be subject to quarantine. These ships would be considered "fully contaminated," and all their passengers would be quarantined for five days before being allowed to enter Mingheria. It was also agreed that any ships departing the island would be quarantined for five days too (Pamuk 2022, 137-138).

When the plague began to spread significantly on the island, passengers on ships arriving from outside Mingheria were not allowed to disembark on the island and were quarantined and this rule also applied to ships leaving the island.

Rather than Alexandria, however, the plague was first recorded in the Ottoman port city of Smyrna (the old name for Izmir). "But, Pasha, in Smyrna too the rats were the first to die. As you know, we now have scientific and medical proof that the plague spreads through rats and fleas." (Pamuk 2022, 40). In the novel, "In those days, trade with Europe was conducted over Smyrna" (59). As the reference suggests, Smyrna in the Ottoman Empire was an important port city on the Aegean Sea, through which various goods reached Europe. The port city of Smyrna is where ships from all over the world arrived and departed, carrying goods and people, so the rats from the ships came ashore and spread the plague. The island of Mingheria, the spatial setting of the novel, was once a center of maritime trade, exporting marble to the Ottoman Empire and other parts of Europe via the Maritime Silk Road, according to the following quote. "Accustomed as they were to receive one ferry a week from Istanbul and two via Smyrna, Alexandria, and Thessaloniki, the Mingherians of Arkaz were surprised and intrigued to hear the whistle of an unscheduled ferry" (Pamuk 2022, 85).

Bonkowski Pasha, a Polish epidemiologist sent by the Sultan in response to the outbreak on the island of Mingheria, claims that the plague is identical to those found in Smyrna, India, and China. "We are certain that the disease that has struck the island of Mingheria is the same as the one observed in Smyrna, in China, and in India" (Pamuk 2022, 51). The island of Mingheria is isolated from the mainland and the only way the plague can spread is by ships entering the harbor. In response, epidemiologist Bonkowski Pasha orders the establishment of a quarantine station at sea and the harbor closure to prevent the plague from spreading to other areas:

In any event, as soon as they reached the countries, cities, and islands to which they were headed (places like Crete, Thessaloniki, Smyrna, Marseille, and Ragosa), all ships carrying passengers from Mingheria were now being confined to makeshift quarantine station in remote, secluded bays, a measure readers will recall from the incident with the

rebellious pilgrims which we recounted at the start of our history. (Pamuk 2022, 286).

Port closures were common during plague epidemics during the Ottoman Empire. For example, during the plague outbreak under the Kanuni Sultan Suleyman (1520-1566), the Sultan banned the entry of goods from China. He ordered all ships from Europe to stop at the harbor (Boyacı 2023).

The closure of the port was intended to cut off access by sea. Bonkowski Pasha had demanded this but the administration's lack of response led to a massive plague outbreak and the panicked islanders of Mingheria began to flee by boat or sea to other locations. As the sea is the route of the plague, they were unable to go ashore from where they arrived and were quarantined for a time in a quarantine center. However, when the authorities on the island of Mingheria were unable to stop the spread of the plague, and many died, powers such as Britain, France, and Russia surrounded the island with their own warships to prevent the plague from reaching Europe:

For the past nine weeks, the island, whose population of eighty thousand is split evenly between Christians and Muslims, has recently been gripped by a terrible outbreak of plague. With the island's local Quarantine Authority failing to control the outbreak, the international community—encouraged by the Ottoman Empire—had sent four warships to blockade the island and prevent the plague from spreading to Europe (Pamuk 2022, 408).

As in the past, the actions of the powers who knew that the plague was spread by sea confirm the maritime route. Moreover, the author clearly indicates the maritime route of the plague in the novel:

The news of the death of a passenger aboard the *Odityis*, which had set sail for Athens before quarantine measures had been imposed, was quickly picked up by all the main newspapers in Greece, whereupon European newspapers began to write that the Ottomans had failed to contain the epidemic that had come to the West from China and India via the Hejaz and Suez and that Europe would have to step in (Pamuk 2022, 257).

At the time, Europeans believed that the plague originated in China and India and reached Europe via the Hejaz region on the Red Sea coast and the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal connected the Mediterranean with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean and was the first maritime link of the Silk Road.

After a series of twists and turns, the Suez Canal was inaugurated with great fanfare in November 1869. At 162.5 kilometers long, it was the world's largest sea-to-sea canal. For Britain, the opening of the Suez Canal cut the distance between London and Singapore in half, from 24,000 kilometers to 15,027 kilometers (Son and Song 2023, 303). Most importantly, the Suez Canal provides a direct link between Asia and Europe without bypassing the African

continent, connecting the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean, thus shortening the distance of the Maritime Silk Road in Eurasia. The novel also states that cholera, like the plague, was spread by hajjis traveling by ship through the Suez Canal to Mecca and Medina for the holy pilgrimage:

During the 1890s, one of the precautions the Great Powers took to halt the outbreaks of cholera that spread from India through to the rest of the world via pilgrim ships passing through Mecca and Medina was to impose a ten-day quarantine on any vessels returning from the holy lands. Empires with colonies in Muslim countries were particularly adamant about the need for this second quarantine. For instance, the French, not trusting the quarantine measures employed by the Ottoman authorities in the Hejaz, would put passengers returning from the hajj to the French colony of Algeria aboard the Messageries Maritimes *Persepolis* through a further obligatory quarantine, and only then allow them to disembark and go back home to their towns and villages (Pamuk 2022, 120).

The route to Mecca was the maritime Silk Road via the Suez Canal, which connected the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. Muslim pilgrims returning by ship from colonized countries were assumed by the powers to be infected with cholera and were quarantined. Like the plague, other infectious diseases, such as cholera, were spread along the Maritime Silk Road.

Meanwhile, as the plague ends on the island of Mingeria, Sultan Pakize and her husband, Dr. Nuri, fearing for their lives, sneak off the island and travel through the Suez Canal to the Chinese port of Tianjin. “After a stormy twenty-day journey, my great-grandmother Queen Pakize and great-grandfather Doctor Nuri arrived with a six-month delay to the port of Tianjin and traveled from there to Peking” (Pamuk 2022, 635).

## Conclusion

In this article, the researcher explores how infectious diseases spread by sea in Orhan Pamuk’s pandemic novel *Nights of Plague*. Other researchers argue that all three major plague epidemics in history were spread by rats that inhabited supply ships, merchant vessels, and trading ports that supported wars and soldiers. This article explores the historical fact that both the land and Maritime Silk Roads were once routes for transmitting not only goods but also germs and infectious diseases. Infectious diseases have coexisted with humans and animals since the dawn of time. Whether it is the plague, which directly contributed to the fall of the ancient Athenian civilization and wreaked havoc in medieval Europe and Asia, smallpox, which was spread to indigenous populations by European invaders of the New World, or more recently, COVID-19, which started in China and has infected and killed countless people around the world, epidemics have plagued humankind.

Infectious diseases have evolved throughout human history and is impossible to

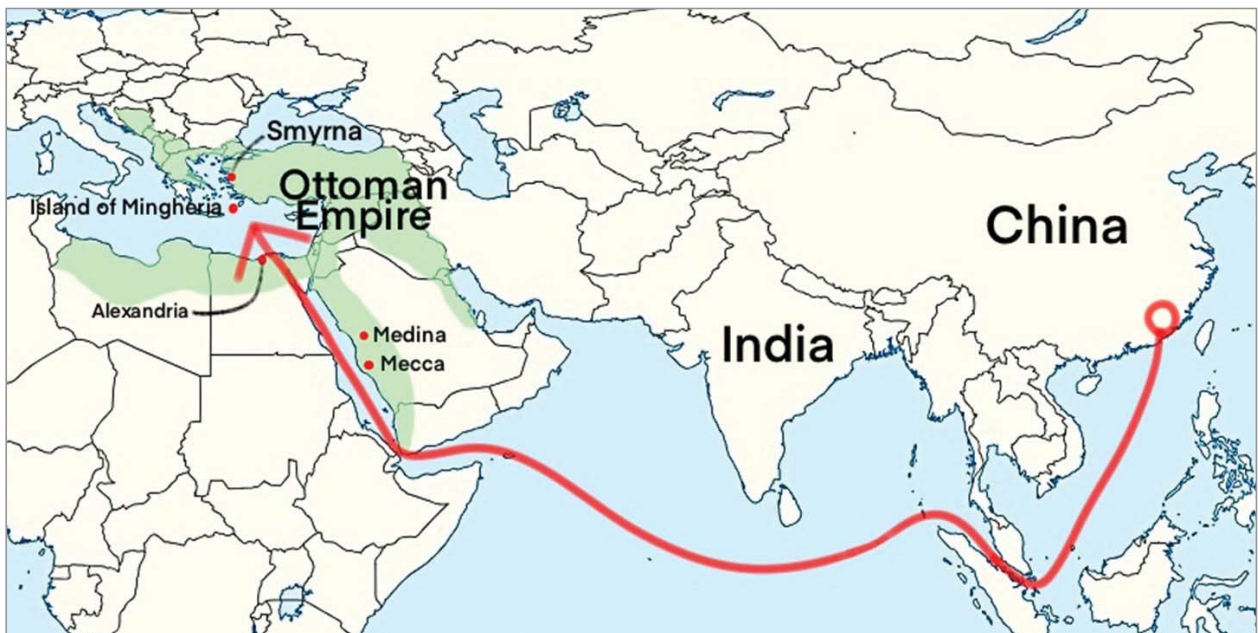
understand human history without considering infectious diseases. For this reason, human history can be seen as a history of fighting against infectious diseases. Infectious diseases, especially those that affect large numbers of people, can determine the fate of a nation. For example, epidemics can be spread by encounters with strangers, such as wars, or when people move in large numbers. Furthermore, as humans began to live in groups and build cities and civilizations, the impact of epidemics has grown tremendously and they have historically been a threat that has caused countless deaths.

Just as great wars, such as the Crusades in the Middle Ages, and the gathering and movement of large populations caused terrible epidemics, the introduction of fast steamships to ocean navigation and the opening of the Suez Canal in the 19th century later made it easier to transport goods and germs from one port to another. With their devastating effects worldwide, nevertheless, pandemics have been the subject of many literary works. Orhan Pamuk's most recent pandemic novel, *Nights of Plague*, focuses on the social conflicts that arise during a plague outbreak on the fictional island of Mingheria in the eastern Mediterranean in 1901 during the fall of the Ottoman Empire, a third plague epidemic, and the country's journey to independence. The author emphasizes that during an epidemic, leadership, the response of government authorities, and the role of the media are crucial to winning or losing the war against the plague and that individual perceptions and actions are equally important.

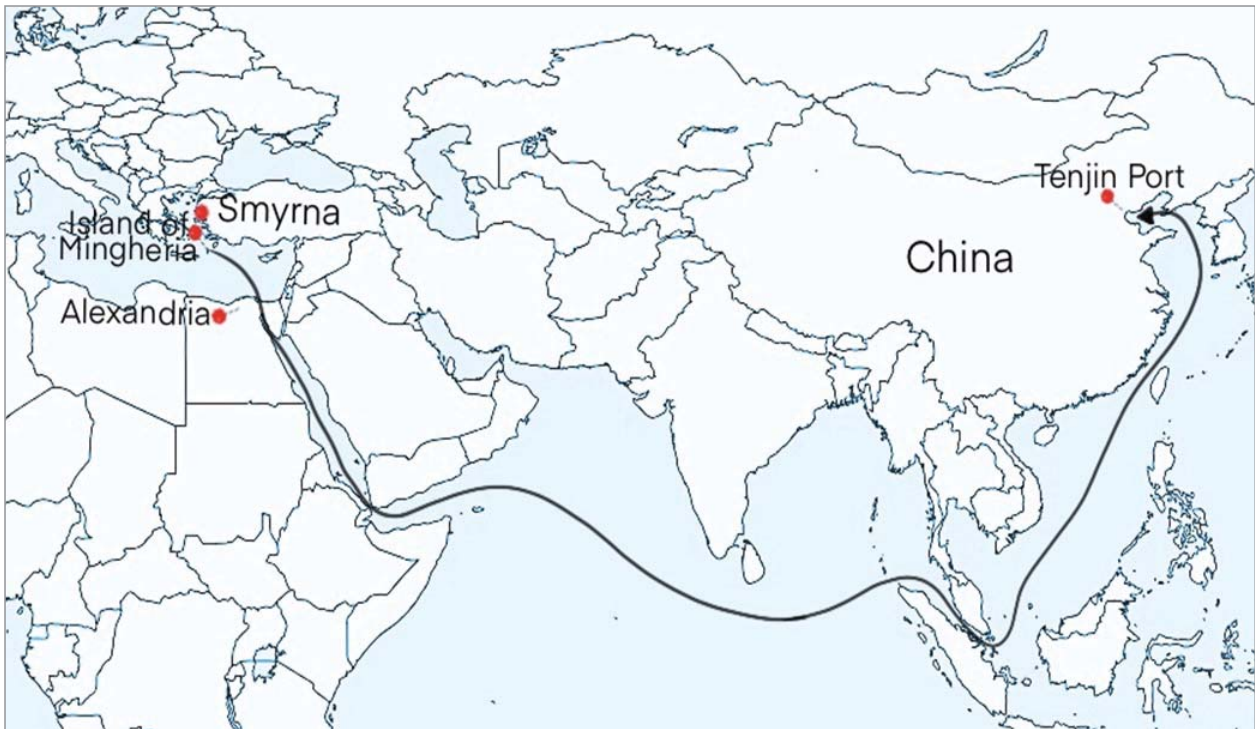
In the novel, a plague that originates in China strikes the Ottoman coastal cities of Smyrna and Mingheria on its way to Europe via India. Smyrna manages to contain the epidemic but the death toll spirals out of control when the plague reaches the island of Mingheria by sea. The novel's spatial setting of an island means that it is connected to the outside world by sea. The only way the plague could have spread to an isolated island was by ship. Rats living in different ports and on ships could have spread the plague as they traveled to other regions or countries. In *Nights of Plague*, the fact that the plague reached the island of Mingheria via the Maritime Silk Road is supported by the ship's route and various narratives. Hence, this novel has allowed us to reflect upon and understand the historical reality described by Orhan Pamuk of the plague spread through the Maritime Silk Road.



Map 1. Smyrna, a port city in the Aegean Sea, and the island of Mingheria in the Eastern Mediterranean, the spatial setting of the novel.



Map 2. Plague transmission route to the island of Mingheria as thought by Europeans at the time.



Map 3. Pakize Sultan's route to China via the Suez Canal by ship.

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