

LEE MORDECHAI / MERLE EISENBERG / TIMOTHY NEWFIELD /  
ADAM IZDEBSKI / JANET KAY

## Doing History: Plague Past and Future – A second response to Mischa Meier

We are thankful that Mischa Meier has engaged with our work. Further discussion of the Justinianic Plague will only present new avenues forward and improve everyone's understanding of late antiquity. Meier's second response raises questions that have wider implications within the historical discipline and are worth discussing more closely. He claimed we argue that:

If historians want to present new findings and insights, they must work and publish in the same way as Mordechai and his colleagues.

We disagree with such a categorical statement. Rather, we believe that historians *can* present new work and insights in diverse ways. While we collaborated to publish the PNAS paper, each of us has emphasized publications within our own disciplines as our main scholarly output. Our collaboration builds upon our belief that many fields of history, e.g. plague studies, gain when scholars adopt collaborative interdisciplinary approaches. While we anticipate learning more from historians who work primarily with written documents, there is no doubt that some topics stray beyond our historical training and into other disciplines, from archaeology to genetics. Utilizing the insights afforded by such disciplines presents novel opportunities that can complement text-based approaches. Bringing new methodological approaches to the written sources should not be avoided simply because they have not been used regularly before.

As for publishing, it is our responsibility to engage (and educate) broader audiences through some of our research. Whether we like it or not, publications within history receive little attention from scientists or the broader public. This leaves plenty of room for non-specialists to establish their own narratives and influence these audiences. As an example, the 2007 book *Justinian's Flea*, written by William Rosen – who is not an academic – was widely rejected by historians but earned extremely positive reviews in the media and was embraced by scientists, who used it in their studies. Historians' refusal to engage with broader audiences has also meant that, in the context of COVID-19, multiple media outlets have reiterated that the Justinianic Plague killed 100 million people, an impossibly high number that can be traced back to an offhand suggestion in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Given this reality, dedicating a fraction of our scholarly output towards broad audience through scientific publications seems not only reasonable but necessary.



Our *PNAS* article hardly solves the questions surrounding the Justinianic Plague—it simply argues that the underpinnings of the existing maximalist narrative of the Justinianic Plague are much weaker than currently thought and that we historians cannot answer all the questions we seek to answer with our methodologies alone. We do not claim our approach is the only legitimate approach or even the best approach. The interdisciplinary and collaborative methodologies, tools, and sources we employ certainly differ from Reinhart Koselleck's vision of history. However, historical methods, like our understanding of the past, have constantly evolved. As they continue to change, our understanding of the Justinianic Plague will change too.

LEE MORDECHAI / MERLE EISENBERG / TIMOTHY NEWFIELD /

ADAM IZDEBSKI / JANET KAY

Lee Mordechai

Room 6512

Department of History, Mt. Scopus campus

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

E-Mail: [lee.mordechai@mail.huji.ac.il](mailto:lee.mordechai@mail.huji.ac.il)



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