



## A VIRUS IN THE OCEAN<sup>1</sup>

History is littered with ironies, so it is perhaps little surprise that the virus currently dominating our imaginations has taken up residence in three great civilisations that have fascinated France's collective consciousness for almost 400 years. In the blink of an eye, chinoiserie, Persian carpets, and the beautiful landscapes of Italy have become a source of repugnance. We know, however, that these three trading powers – turned coronavirus hotbeds – became irresistible world forces when they took to the seas. The Achaemenid (or “First Persian”) Empire is nothing more than a distant memory, and much the same can be said of Venice's former adventures in the East. We are aware that China's intimate relationship with the ocean shapes a large part of our economy. In what way, therefore, would the seas be impacted by a virus which American nationalists consider a *godsend*? One word sums it up well: disruption. The reason is simple enough. The virus flourishes in the open, salty waters of the liberal goldfish bowl. This environment is its stage, and it continues to captivate its rapt audience in spite of its habit of lashing out extravagantly just when it appears to be taking its leave. Does it, too, not have the old, inalienable right, tacitly recognised by maritime powers, of *freedom of movement*? This same freedom enabled the plague to get a temporary stranglehold over the Roman Empire's Nerva–Antonine dynasty and, in later times, make 23 incursions into Venice's eastern territories.

The virus has thus parasitized our globalised organism and, as long as the host refuses to disintegrate, it and its affliction are forced to inhabit the same space. This is by no means new. Ocean travel has long helped to pass on disease. For nearly 1000 years, monsoon-drenched Asian nations such as India, former Indochina and China itself have been the source of half the epidemics that made their way westwards along the Mediterranean<sup>2</sup>. When it opened, the Suez Canal unsurprisingly accelerated this process. As a result, ports such as Le Havre have become natural receptors for epidemics. This explains why authorities in a port that annually plays host to 500,000 Chinese containers are working hard to reassure local people. Militarily valuable ports rank among some of the most significant cities with maritime links to the wider world and the microbes which inhabit it. As a result, Marseille and Venice have been among the first to implement security measures to protect public health. As for islands, once viruses have managed to penetrate, these too prove easy prey. Between 1866 and 1869, malaria killed 40,000 Mauritians. Similarly, influenza killed 20% of the Society Islands' population in 1918. This is

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<sup>2</sup> The first wave of cholera to hit France in 1832 was the one of seven that struck Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. After emerging out of the Ganges and Brahmaputra valleys in 1826, cholera made its way ineluctably along maritime trade routes.

why, since 27 February 2020, ships have only been permitted to enter French Polynesia via Tahiti's Papeete Port.

The most vocal victims of our current maritime disruption are cruise ship passengers. They are certainly more loquacious than the 350,000 container ships withdrawn from markets, especially when they are unfortunate enough to want to return home to the US, like the tourists currently confined on the luxury *Grand Princess*. The US is the greatest beneficiary of a disease that, by fate's mysterious hand, is paralysing two of its three major geopolitical adversaries. It is not in its interests to allow the virus to achieve any kind of purchase in the country. In France, Toulon is enjoying the benefits brought by several boatloads of tourists diverted away from Italy towards Provence, at least until another, less infected, port takes its place. Yet the biggest story of the day is, of course, the significant slowdown in Chinese maritime trade. If the Baltic Dry Index's numbers are to be believed, shipping companies are currently in the red. China accounts for nearly 40% of the world's maritime imports, and 70% of the major container terminals are Chinese. Capesize ships – enormous vessels filled with coal or iron – are becoming scarcer between Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope. Hubei Province's slowdown alone is creating repercussions for 51,000 overseas companies. The ports of Rotterdam<sup>3</sup>, Hamburg and Valencia are also seeing business dwindle. The inevitable conclusion to be drawn from this episode is that, yet again, our wise risk forecasters, relying solely on automated indicators, have failed to anticipate an *unforeseen* event foreseen a thousand times over by history books but invisible to the bedazzled, amnesiac eye of futurologists. All it takes is a single germ for supposedly scientific algorithms to break up in the face of biological reality. Does it please God that mathematics fanatics have turned to old, Romantic writings in order to find a way into a world hitherto unknown to them?

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<sup>3</sup> Europe's biggest port, Rotterdam, is also China's key transitional zone for goods bound for north-western Europe. Coronavirus is set to singlehandedly wipe out 1% of the world's container traffic over the course of 2020. The Dutch port is responsible for 45% of intercontinental container ship trade with Asia. Port authorities predict this sector alone will shrink by 20%. The harbourmaster has reported, however, that the effects are rippling out into all its areas of business.