

Ottoman and Turkish Environmental History: An Overview of the Field

Ottoman and Turkish studies is a field that incorporates diverse geographic regions and long periods of history, providing fertile ground for environmental history. For the past several years, researchers in the field, including me, have grumbled about the lack of interest in environmental history among Middle Eastern historians. As I have stated elsewhere, environmental history is a ‘fledgling sub-field of Ottoman history’,¹ since the number of environmental historical studies focusing on the Ottoman Empire and Turkey is remarkably limited. Compared to the increasing number of studies with different perspectives on North America, Europe, Asia and Africa, the Middle East remains a rather neglected geographical area; it is, as the American environmental historian Alan Mikhail has stated, ‘one of the gaping holes in the global story of the environment’.² It is also true that environmental history is attracting some attention in Ottoman and Turkish studies and receives a stepchild treatment from the scholars of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. There nonetheless remains a growing interest in the Ottoman/Turkish past from an environmental point-of-view – especially among young researchers.

The varied geography and climatic and environmental diversity of the country initially appeared on the radar of historians based in the United States. Environmental historians at Columbia, Yale, Ohio State and Georgetown have carried out excellent pioneering research about the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. Alan Mikhail, perhaps the most prolific scholar in this area, produced *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (2011), which describes the vital importance of water for human survival as well as the ways people controlled, managed and used water resources.³ Through a study of irrigation and water usage, Mikhail examines the imperial system of natural resource use, coordination and transport in Ottoman Egypt between 1650 and 1820. In a subsequent study, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (2014), Mikhail showed connections between humans, animals and natural

1. Onur Inal, ‘Environmental History as an Emerging Field in Ottoman Studies: An Historiographical Overview’, *The Journal of Ottoman Studies* **38** (2011): 25.
2. Alan Mikhail, ‘Introduction: Middle East Environmental History: The Fallow Between Two Fields’, in *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Alan Mikhail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 1.
3. Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

resources set in the Ottoman imperial realm.⁴ Here, Mikhail demonstrated not only the economic dimensions of animals, but also their many other roles in the agrarian economy of the Ottoman Empire. Sam White offered an important contribution to the field by analysing the impact of the Little Ice Age on the socio-political and socio-economic life of Ottoman society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In his comprehensive, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (2011), White explores the sharp demographic, socio-political and economic contraction the Ottomans experienced in the late-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, due to environmental and climatic factors.⁵

Turkish historians, Nükhet Varlık and Birsen Bulmuş, examine the interplay between epidemic diseases and political, economic and social issues in the Ottoman Empire, taking special interest in the bubonic plague, and the Ottoman response to this epidemic from a medical historical perspective.⁶ Yaron Ayalon has explored the social history of natural disasters with an environmental history flavour.⁷

When we look at the post-Ottoman period, we see a growing interest by environmental humanities scholars in environmental politics of the Islamic-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Fikret Adaman, professor of economics, edited the volumes *Environmentalism in Turkey: Between Democracy and Development?* (2016) and *Neoliberal Turkey and Its Discontents: Economic Policy and the Environment under Erdoğan* (2017).⁸ Both volumes critically reflect on, and contribute to, debates related to the human and ecological costs of urbanisation and the (neo)liberalism of the Erdoğan government. Adding to these studies are a number of political ecologists, political sociologists and urban sociologists such as Sinan Erensü, Ozan Karaman, Bengi Akbulut, Ethemcan Turhan and Arif Gündoğan – to name a few – who have been deeply involved in exposing the ecological impact of Erdoğan's strong commitment to socio-environmentally destructive transportation and energy investments, such as a third bridge over the Bosphorus, a huge airport in the middle of Istanbul's northern forests and a canal to connect Marmara to the Black Sea. Erdoğan's

4. Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

5. Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

6. Nükhet Varlık, *Plague and Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean World: The Ottoman Experience, 1347–1600* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Birsen Bulmuş, *Plague, Quarantines and Geopolitics in the Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

7. Yaron Ayalon, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and other Misfortunes, 1347–1600* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

8. Fikret Adaman and Murat Arsel, *Environmentalism in Turkey: Between Democracy and Development?* (New York: Routledge, 2016); and Fikret Adaman, Bengi Akbulut and Murat Arsel, *Neoliberal Turkey and Its Discontents: Economic Policy and the Environment under Erdoğan* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

aggressive neo-liberal politics, at the heart of which lie the monetisation of the natural environment, privatisation of public realms (including public green spaces) and the expropriation and redistribution of property, will continue to draw the interest of environmental historians.

In short, Ottoman and Turkish environmental historians are increasingly investigating such topics as natural disasters, natural resources, epidemics, animals, environmental protests and climate change. The above sample of titles suggests that environmental history is indeed penetrating mainstream historiography in Turkey. Environmental history clearly offers intriguing possibilities for rethinking the history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey as its major heir.

Auspiciously, the past months have seen some significant steps taken for the development of environmental history in and of Turkey. On 27–28 October 2017, the *TürkeiEuropaZentrum* (TEZ) of the University of Hamburg hosted an international conference entitled ‘Environmental History of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey’. The two-day conference, funded by the Asia Africa Institute of the University of Hamburg (AAI), German Research Foundation (DFG) and the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH), was divided into seven panels, each exploring historical processes and transformations that have shaped the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey from the viewpoint of the environment. A total of 23 panelists presented their research on different aspects of Ottoman and Turkish environmental history. Ottoman and Turkish environmental historians had already attended meetings of the ESEH, the American Society for Environmental History (ASEH) and the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), but the conference in Hamburg was the first ever academic meeting dedicated to Ottoman and Turkish environmental history. Even this small-scale meeting illustrated that the above subjects are offering fresh perspectives on the study of the Ottoman and Turkish past.

There were three substantive outcomes of the conference, the first being the Network for the Study of Environmental History of Turkey (NEHT). Hosted currently by the TEZ of the University of Hamburg, it provides a platform for further cooperation and exchange of information among environmental historians of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey from around the world. The second outcome is the conference proceedings, edited by Onur Inal and Yavuz Köse of the University of Hamburg, which is slated for publication by The White Horse Press later this year. The other immediate outcome is that participants agreed to convening a second meeting in 2019 and regularly thereafter.

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