

Book Reviews

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Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse (eds), *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman*

Environmental History (Winwick, Cambridgeshire: The White Horse Press, 2019), pp. 250, isbn 9781-874267-997.

Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse's new edited volume *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental History* is a timely contribution to a burgeoning field. Within the historiography of the Ottoman Empire, scholars have only begun to deploy environmental approaches within the past decade, beginning with the publication of Alan Mikhail's *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* and Sam White's *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*. The chapters that comprise *Seeds of Power* reflect the richness of social, agricultural, and economic history in the literature that describes the Ottoman Empire and suggest promising new avenues for research in Ottoman environmental history.

Seeds of Power is divided into four sections, each of which focuses on a particular theme. The authors of the first two chapters of the volume's first section, entitled "Climate and Landscapes," examine how climatic conditions might be assessed, drawing heavily from the state's taxation records. In *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, Sam White traces the effects of the so-called Little Ice Age in Anatolia. In the three centuries that stretched between the 1550s and the 1850s, higher altitudes experienced increases in winter precipitation and more prevalent drought when the weather warmed. White argues that among the deleterious effects of this change in climate, the hardship that resulted contributed to the outbreak of the rebellions known as the Celali revolts (1590–1610) in eastern Anatolia. Elias Kolovos and Phokion

Kotzageorgis investigate the manifestation of the Little Ice Age in the Ottoman Empire's Greek territories. In their essay, Kolovos and Kotzageorgis argue that, while the peninsula of Halkidiki and the island of Crete experienced a change in climate in this period, it was less extreme and its political effects distinct from what occurred in Anatolia, calling into question the empire-wide

applicability of the story that White tells.¹ In the second piece in this section, Mehmet Kuru revisits the theme of the empire's prosperity in the sixteenth century during the reign of Sultan Süleyman i, the Lawgiver. Kuru demonstrates that favorable climatic conditions during the period of Süleyman's rule helped to produce a demographic expansion and an increase in the surface area of arable agricultural land, which meant increased taxation revenues for the state.² As in the work of Kolovos and Kotzageorgis, Kuru makes good use of tax registers and is attentive to discrepancies in climate conditions in different regions of the empire, in this case, those distinguishing Mediterranean coastal zones from arid and semi-arid regions of central and southeastern Anatolia. In the final chapter of this section, Suraiya Faroqhi unpacks what we might learn about wine grape production and consumption in the last quarter of the eighteenth century from the text of Italian scholar Domenico Sestini. Faroqhi's piece challenges the notion that because the Ottoman Empire was an Islamic polity, the consumption of wine did not occur, arguing that narrative sources like that penned by Sestini are important for learning about activities that the state officially prohibited.³

The second section in *Seeds of Power*, "Energy and Resources," explores different facets of resource use and consumption in Ottoman history. The first two chapters of the section treat the empire's history as part of the world economy in the nineteenth century. Onur İnal describes the production of figs and grapes in Western Anatolia and the region's transformation into a cash crop economy focused on the export of dried fruit to consumers in American and Western European cities. İnal's piece is one of several in this volume that examine the relationships linking urban centers, in this case the city of Izmir, to their hinterlands. In one of the standout chapters of the volume, Semih Çelik explores the impact of the world economy on villages of woodcutters and the buffalos that helped them to haul their load. While the forests of the region had long been used as a source of wood for shipbuilding and charcoal to heat Istanbul, the construction of larger ships in the nineteenth century and that of infrastructure produced an uptick in the demand for wood and the

- 1 Kolovos, Elias and Phokion Kotzageorgis, "Searching for the 'Little Ice Age' effects in the Ottoman Greek lands: The cases of Salonica and Crete," in *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental History*, Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse (eds) (Winwick, Cambridgeshire: The White Horse Press, 2019), p. 30.
- 2 Kuru, Mehmet, "A 'magnificent' climate: Demography, land and labour in sixteenth-century Anatolia," in *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 3 Faroqhi, Suraiya, "Producing grapes and wine on the Bosphorus in the eighteenth century: The testimony of Domenico Sestini," in *Ibid.*, p. 70.

state-mandated corvée labor expected of humans and animals alike.⁴ The extra strain placed on the buffalos used to drag wood over poor roads resulted in the deaths of many. As mortality increased, peasants began to sell off their animals as a means of upending the system of corvée.⁵ The final essay of this section examines the significance of water in seventeenth-century Cyprus and the question of its scarcity. Styliani Lepida argues that water was indeed scarce in this period, demonstrated in part by cases brought before Ottoman courts, and that the state attempted to control its distribution through mechanisms that included the establishment of water *vakıfs* and the construction of aqueducts.⁶

The volume's third section, "Technologies and Infrastructures," chronicles the construction and transformation of Ottoman cities during the nineteenth century. K. Mehmet Kentel's chapter, one of the strongest in the volume, explores the provision of water to the Pera district of Istanbul. Kentel tells the history of access to the resource in the capital and the linkages between Pera and the more rural Terkos region, which became the source of the elite district's water and a rural playground for members of the Istanbul elite who hunted there.⁷ Within the city, access to water correlated with class status. So did it in the countryside. In Terkos, urban water consumption impacted fishing for local villagers. Mohamed Gamal-Eldin's well-crafted chapter also traces urban landscapes of water but in the Suez Canal cities of Ismailia and Port Sa'íd. Like Kentel, Gamal-Eldin applies an environmental historical lens to material urban space, describing in rich detail the construction of the two cities.⁸ Gamal-Eldin's focus is the effect of malaria outbreaks in quashing colonial aspirations for the newly built urban areas.

The essays that comprise the fourth and final section, "Ideas and Actors," describe different environmental imaginaries and the contexts in which they were rooted. Chris Gratien's carefully argued piece examines the controversy that surrounded the cultivation of rice during the first years of the twentieth century, demonstrating that "agriculture was not merely the target of state regulation but also a field of political contention."⁹ During the late nineteenth

- 4 Çelik, Semih, “It’s a bad fate to be born near a forest’: Forest, people and buffaloes in mid-nineteenth century north-western Anatolia,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 116.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 6 Lepida, Styliani N., “Water management in an Ottoman province: The case of Cyprus in the seventeenth century,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 144–46, 148.
- 7 Kentel, K. Mehmet, “Nature’s ‘cosmopolis’: Villagers, engineers, and animals along Terkos waterworks in late nineteenth-century Istanbul,” in *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 8 Gamal-Eldin, Mohamed, “Cesspools, mosquitos and fever: An environmental history of malaria prevention in Ismailia and Port Sa`id, 1869–1910,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 191–97.
- 9 Gratien, Chris, “The rice debates: Political ecology in the Ottoman parliament,” in *Ibid.*, p. 213.

century, the association of wetlands with mosquitos and mosquitos with malaria rendered rice paddies hazardous landscapes in the minds of some public health officials. As debate raged in the Ottoman parliament concerning the 1910 Rice Cultivation Law, liberals, often large landowners who wanted to limit the extent of state intervention in agriculture, faced off with technocrats, who fought to see the state extend its influence to combat the malaria that was associated with the existence of standing water. Agriculture was not the only realm of environmental thinking in the late years of the empire. In his search for the imprint of the famous Prussian geographer, explorer, and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic, Yavuz Köse describes the significance of the field of geography, which became central to nationalist imagination beginning in the Hamidian period (1876–1909).¹⁰ In 1932, the Turkish intellectual Mustafa Niyazi published a biography of Humboldt. However, the man who featured in the text was not the “cosmopolitan environmentalist” portrayed in other accounts but was rather marshalled by Niyazi to support the Turkish nationalism of the period.¹¹ In the last chapter of the volume, Selçuk Dursun explores the fate of forest lands held as communal property. Dursun describes the process through which the Ottoman land codes implemented in the second half of the nineteenth century resulted in the expropriation of these forests and their appropriation by the state.¹² This chapter is an important complement to the literature concerning the dispossession of the peasantry that is associated with the implementation of nineteenth-century land reform in the empire.

One of the great strengths of the chapters that comprise *Seeds of Power* is the manner in which they shed new light on familiar themes in the historiography of the Ottoman Empire. From Lake Terekos to Ismailia, many of the contributions to this volume approach the Ottoman history of the nineteenth-century world economy from new angles. Chapters by İnal, Çelik, Kentel, and Gamal-Eldin help to complicate our understandings of the lived experiences of this economy and the relationships—human and otherwise—with which they were associated. Çelik’s contribution is particularly rich in this respect. Kentel and Gamal-Eldin describe the urban environments that were linked to

this economy in rich and richly material detail, complicating nostalgia for the cosmopolitanism of the period. Kentel, Çelik, and İnal are attentive to the relations that linked cities to their hinterlands. There is also plentiful material in

- 10 Köse, Yavuz, "Discovering the nature of the new homeland: Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) in the Ottoman Empire and in early republican Turkey," in *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- 12 Dursun, Selçuk, "Dispossession by concession: Forest commons in the Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic," in *Ibid.*, pp. 273–74.

Seeds of Power with which to complicate our understanding of agriculture in the empire. Kolovos and Kotzageorgis, Kuru, Lepida, and Dursun demonstrate how—and how not—the broader environment might be a force in shaping political history through its significance for agricultural production. Finally, Gratien's piece shows how questions linked to the environment helped to mold the different camps that marked elite political contestations in the late empire.

In addition to its fresh approach to familiar historical themes, *Seeds of Power* is marked by other notable strengths. While more of the volume's chapters focus on the nineteenth century than any other period, the editors included contributions from the sixteenth century through the twentieth. The geographic focus of the volume is Anatolia, and to a lesser extent Greece, this concentration a strategic choice in light of the relatively more plentiful work concerning the environmental history of the Arab territories of the empire. One of the volume's greatest strengths is its rich and varied source base and the authors' explicit exploration of how particular sources might be used to pose environmental questions. Various Ottoman tax registers, state archives in the former southeastern European territories of the empire, monastery records, foreign narratives, foreign travelogues, Ottoman parliamentary records, foreign consular reports, and textbooks are only some of the genres of sources that the contributors to this volume draw on. In this respect, *Seeds of Power* will serve as an important teaching tool for undergraduate and graduate students alike who are interested in Ottoman environmental history. In the book's foreword, Alan Mikhail states that "the essays in this book explore the myriad ways one of the world's largest and most durable empires, the longest-lasting in the history of the Muslim world, influenced how humanity lived with, in, through, and against nature."¹³ To the credit of the editors, the volume's different chapters demonstrate Ottoman endeavors to manage and administer the natural world and the significance of this world to the diverse historical experiences of the empire's populations.

Despite its considerable strengths, *Seeds of Power* also lays bare the work that remains in the field of Ottoman environmental history. The quality of the

essays that comprise the volume is uneven. Some pieces make strong historical arguments informed by environmental historical approaches and a rich source base—chapters by Kentel, Gratien, Gamal-Eldin, and Çelik stand out—others read as expositions of sources. Moreover, the conceptual approaches with which many of the volume's contributors approach their sources hew too closely to the social and economic historical approaches that dominate the

13 Mikhail, Alan, "Foreword: Ottoman and nature," in *Ibid.*, p. viii.

existent historiography. Analyses of gender are a notable omission as are critical intellectual historical approaches that consider the indigenous environmental imaginaries that prevailed within the empire. Finally, while students of Ottoman history will find much value in *Seeds of Power*, environmental historians looking for new conceptual approaches will find less of interest. The work that remains for environmental historians of the Ottoman Empire is that of imagining the diverse forms of relationality between humans and the non-human material world, the different avenues through which this relationality shaped historical change, and how scholars of Ottoman history might write the non-human world not as a static object but rather with its own motion, directionality, and priorities.

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