

The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 19, No 1 (2022)

The Historical Review / La Revue Historique

The *H*istorical Review
La Revue *H*istorique



VOLUME XIX (2022)

Section de Recherches Néohelléniques
Institut de Recherches Historiques / FNRS

Section of Neohellenic Research
Institute of Historical Research / NHRF

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

George L. Vlachos

Copyright © 2023



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Vlachos, G. L. (2023). Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse (eds.), *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental History*. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 19(1), 259–262. Retrieved from <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historicalReview/article/view/35065> (Original work published July 31, 2023)

Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Onur İnal and Yavuz Köse (eds.),

SEEDS OF POWER:

EXPLORATIONS IN OTTOMAN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Winwick: White Horse Press, 2019, 292 pages

More than a decade has passed since the seminal publication of *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt* (2011), Alan Mikhail's monograph that inaugurated the expansion of the field of environmental history into southeastern Europe and the Middle East, regions that were uncharted in that manner. Since then, the dissemination of the young field – already an established one in North America and Western Europe – has been uphill work, but has never stagnated.

While the British, French and even Austro-Hungarian transnational empires had their global environmental histories written to a certain degree, up until the publication of this edited volume the Ottoman realm lacked one. In fact this volume constitutes the first attempt at delineating the field of Ottoman environmental history, both in terms of territorial inclusion as well as chronological one, examining case studies from Cyprus to the Crimean pe-

ninsula and ranging from the sixteenth century up to the collapse of the empire. The area and period it tries to cover is immense, even though it comprises only eleven chapters. The ambition of the editors should not surprise us. Both of them are experienced in the field of Ottoman environmental history, and especially Onur İnal ought to be credited as the main scholar that helped foster environmental history in Turkey, being at the same time a prolific writer, the regional representative of Turkey in the European Society for Environmental History (ESEH) and among the founding members of the Network for the Study of Environmental History of Turkey (NEHT).

Mikhail, as an authority in the field, opens the volume with a foreword, giving us a brief glance into the erratically documented past of the interaction between people and the Ottoman natural cosmos. The edited volume has been divided in four parts, which adhere to

common conceptual groupings found in the field of environmental history: “Climate and Landscapes”, “Resources and Energies”, “Technologies and Infrastructures” and “Ideas and Actors”. However, as the reader will note, some chapters transcend this division into parts and match well together regardless of their place in the volume.

The first two chapters of the volume attempt to bring to our attention aspects of the Little Ice Age across the Ottoman realm that question Sam White’s argument linking the social unrest that Anatolia witnessed during the sixteenth century with the ever changing climate of the region. More particularly, the first article, by Elias Kolovos and Phokion Kotzageorgis, explores the effects of the Little Ice Age in the regions of central Macedonia and Crete (both, of course, Ottoman at the time). They conclude that, despite the negative effects of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century climate change on these regions, the impact on the social order was not as devastating as in Anatolia, as White had concluded. For the authors, this is an indicator that White’s argument should still be treated as a regional case-study rather than an all-encompassing theory, the application of which could be extended outside seventeenth-century Anatolia. Along the same lines, the contributor of the second chapter, Mehmet Kuru, seeks to “reconsider the Anatolia-wide demographic growth of the sixteenth century” (35) by examining a set of new parameters. With shifts in the climate of the region, larger agricultural surpluses, supported by the increased military capacity of the empire, in his chapter Kuru embellishes the Ottoman Empire’s peak with environmental characteristics.

The next two chapters transcend environmental history, briefly stepping into the fields of agricultural history, though of course through an environmental point of view. In the third chapter, Suraiya Faroqhi narrates the history of viticulture in the eighteenth-century Bosphorus through the eyes of the Florentine Domenico Sestini, who provided ample information on the matter. Faroqhi poses a very simple question that triggers her story. Why did viticulture in the Bosphorus region eventually disappear, while it had been one of the prominent agricultural activities during the eighteenth century? The environmental-agricultural pattern continues with the next contribution, that of Onur İnal. In this chapter, İnal suggests boldly that the flow of the main commodities of the coastal Asia Minor, namely figs and raisins, were of such immense importance as to render Izmir one of the most prominent port-cities in the eastern Mediterranean. By reversing the city–hinterland narrative (a small-scale centre–periphery paradigm), the author succeeds in highlighting the environmental factors and land-use changes that allowed Izmir to flourish and its countryside to become one of the first cases of intensified agriculture in the Ottoman Empire.

The next chapter is among the most captivating in the volume. In it, Semih Çelik succeeds in constructing a balanced tripartite history, split between people, animals and the forests of Anatolia. Based on precious administrative primal sources of the nineteenth century, Çelik highlights the effort of the Ottoman state to intensify timber extraction using the

local but rarely eager population of the Anatolian forests and their oxen as a workforce. This particular chapter fits rather well with the last chapter of this volume, entitled “Dispossession by Concession: Forest Commons in the Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic”, in which Selçuk Dursun picks up the forest management thread, only this time in the twentieth century. Dursun unravels the process that led to the privatization of forest use which was driven by the state. The concession of forests to wealthy individuals and timber traders, Dursun argues, restricted the access of nearby communities to sylvan goods, a right that they traditionally had held.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine yet another remarkable theme in environmental history, but one that does not receive the recognition it deserves: water. The two chapters, by Styliani Lepida and K. Mehmet Kentel, respectively, investigate the politics of management of this most invaluable resource. On the one hand, Lepida demonstrates the social and political paradigm-shift that was triggered due to the scarcity of reliable water sources in Cyprus during the seventeenth century. As she argues, the control of water became gradually and organically one of the main factors that drove land-acquisition patterns, disputes over water distribution, etc., on the island. On the other hand, Kentel encourages us to take this notion one step further and demonstrates an environmental history of inequality that stemmed from the waterworks at a lake outside Istanbul. As he argues, the massive Terkos Lake waterworks project would eventually supply clean

running water to Pera, Istanbul’s bourgeois neighbourhood. And apart from the fact that the rest of the capital still did not have access to this particular resource, the works at Terkos Lake also restricted the access of the local communities to the lake, thus severing their economic and social coherence, due to the touristic gentrification of the lake that drew scores of Pera residents in their search for a quaint spot near the capital.

Chapter 8, by Mohamed Gamal-Eldin, entitled “Cesspools, Mosquitoes and Fever”, constitutes a very refreshing take on how environmental historians should approach disease as a whole, namely not as fateful incident but as product of poorly planned human activity. Gamal-Eldin asserts that the malaria outbreaks in Ismailia and Port Said, near the Suez Canal, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, were the result of unplanned and hasty urban development projects, such as the construction of irrigation ditches that offered breeding grounds for anopheles mosquitoes. Apart from providing us with precious technical details, the author also comments on these badly thought-out processes as a colonisation effort more than anything else.

Continuing with the same pattern on public health, in chapter 9 Chris Gartien examines the impact that malaria prevention had on the organisation of Ottoman agriculture. The chapter constitutes a comprehensive macroscopic analysis of the parliamentary debates of the late Ottoman Empire. It places special emphasis on highlighting the fact that both camps, one made up by technocrats and the other by wealthy

landowners, negotiated the matter more on ecological rather than on political terms, inaugurating, as Gartiën suggests, a socio-ecological agenda in the politics of the Ottoman Empire.

In the tenth chapter, Yavuz Köse undertakes a thorough discourse analysis of a biography of Alexander von Humboldt that was published in 1932 by Mustafa Niyazi. Niyazi was a geography teacher and wrote this piece not merely to celebrate the contributions of Humboldt to the science of geography. By intertwining the need for nation-building in the young Turkish Republic and geography, Köse rightly argues that Niyazi's publication about Humboldt should be seen as an attempt for the youth of Kemalist Turkey to get well-acquainted with their fatherland.

Overall, İnal and Köse's edited volume is a fine example of the path the new promising field of environmental history must follow in order for it to rise above its marginal label. Despite the fact that environmental history can and *is* being written in many ways, many of which are experimental, relying on hard science and analytical tools that historians commonly find challenging, this volume shows that there is much

merit to be found in the traditional archival approaches of conducting and narrating environmental history. There is indeed a misunderstanding among those not trained in the field of environmental history that in order to engage in environmental historical narratives one must be something of a positivist scientist. This cannot be further from the truth, as every single author in this publication proves that written sources of any kind, when cross-examined and read meticulously, can extend our understanding of long-gone ecosystems and environments. Thus environmental history immediately becomes a viable field for a young historian to acknowledge, study and write. This is what environmental history seeks to do, especially in those national historiographical traditions that have not yet wholly embraced the new field, and this is why İnal and Köse's edited volume ought to be seen as one of the first significant steps towards the recognition of environmental history in the Middle East and Southeastern Europe.

George L. Vlachos

Institute for Historical Research / NHRF