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INTERVIEW: ON ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY WITH ALAN MIKHAIL

Dilara AVCI*

Interview

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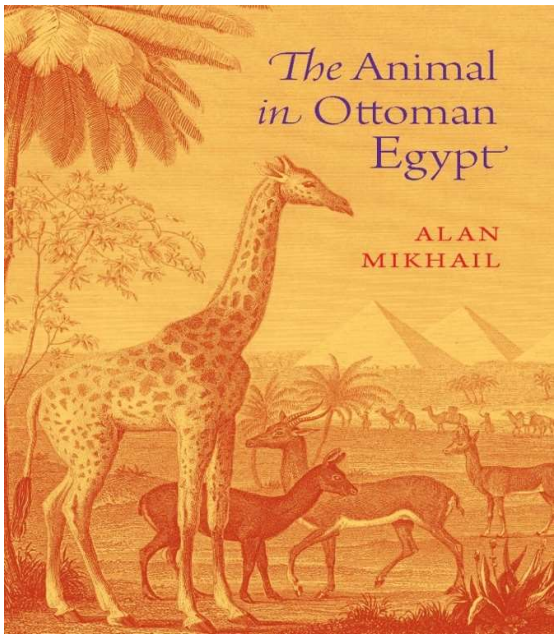
Alan Mikhail's Biography

Alan Mikhail is the Chace Family Professor of History at Yale University. He is the author of five books and editor of another. His first book, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History*, helped to establish the field of Ottoman environmental history. It received the Roger Owen Book Award of the Middle East Studies Association. Both it and *Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Environmental History* have been translated into Turkish. His most recent book, *My Egypt Archive*, received the Victor Turner Prize in Ethnographic Writing of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, and before that *God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World* won the Gold Medal in World History from the Independent Publisher Book Awards, was a finalist for the Connecticut Book Award, was longlisted for the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence, and was named a book of the year by the *Times Literary Supplement*, *History Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Glamour*. It has also been translated into Turkish, in addition to several other languages.



Interview

Dilara Avcı: What is environmental history and how do you think about it?

Alan Mikhail: This is obviously a very broad question. I think of environmental history as the history of the relationships of everything with everything else. I realize this is perhaps unsatisfying, but that generality is part of the power of environmental history. *All* history is in some sense environmental history. All living and non-living things have an environmental history. That is, they have a history of their relationships. Everything on Earth originates from Earth. Except for the

* Arş. Gör., Kırşehir Ahi Evran Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Tarih Bölümü, e-posta: dilara.avci@ahievran.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7570-6011

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occasional item from outer space, almost everything on this planet has come from this planet. How? What are those histories? How we got from what this planet was—at any particular point you like in Earth's history, which is obviously not static—to our homes, cars, and all the advanced technologies around us, tracing those histories, that is ultimately environmental history. To me, at least.

Dilara Avcı: What were your reasons for turning to this field?

Alan Mikhail: I did not enter graduate school specifically to become an environmental historian, though if we buy that all history is in some sense a subset of environmental history, then the choice to become a historian was the choice to become an environmental historian, whether or not I knew it at the time. Nevertheless, to address your question specifically—within Middle Eastern and Ottoman history, scholars have long been interested in agricultural history: the history of crop cultivation, tax collection, farmers and their complex economic and social relationships, the place of animals in society. Environmental history continues this tradition within Middle Eastern and Ottoman studies. Focusing on environmental history is thus not a radical departure from established topics in these fields. What I find valuable about environmental history, however, is its ability to center these relationships between humans and other parts of nature to bring to the fore other histories. It allows us to explore how these relationships functioned at specific times and in specific places. Given the abundant sources and the fundamental importance of these topics for understanding the broader historical context of Ottoman and Middle Eastern history, it seemed to me, and still seems to me, that there is significant potential for this type of work. Copious sources and fundamental topics—hence essential histories.

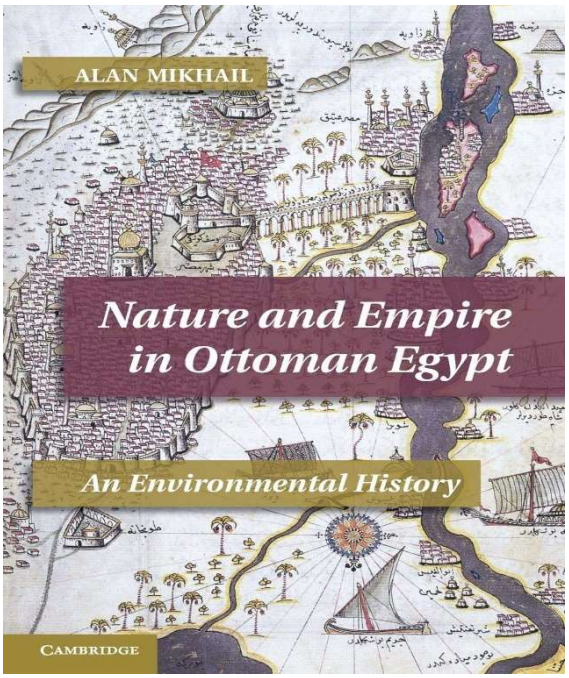
Dilara Avcı: Specifically, why do you think environmental history is useful in studying Ottoman Egypt?

Alan Mikhail: As we mentioned already, there is a long historiographical tradition of interest in topics related to agriculture, cultivation, food production, and the management of natural resources. This is true for Middle Eastern history in general and we might say especially so for Egypt, where records about these topics date back roughly 5,000 years. Scholars since before and after say Herodotus have shown a sustained interest in examining these topics, understanding how fundamental they are to the study of Egypt.

If everywhere on Earth has an environmental history, then there is nothing unique about Egypt, but it does have its particularities. Egypt's geography and place in world history make it uniquely suited for environmental history. The Nile River is obviously central to Egypt's culture, history, and geography. Since antiquity, Egypt served as the breadbasket for various Mediterranean political powers. Egypt lacked significant wood resources throughout its history, which tied it through the necessity of importation to regions in Africa and the Levant. Its position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds further highlights its historical and

geographical significance on a global scale. Therefore, there are the structural aspects of Egypt's history that are relevant for any period.

If we take Ottoman Egypt specifically, we can examine the way these topics intersected with the empire's history. For example, Egypt was a primary center of food production for Istanbul as it had been since Rome, supplying various locations throughout the empire with foodstuffs. There are Ottoman-specific aspects to Egypt's history too, though. It was the empire's second-largest city and one of the empire's largest provinces. Its strategic and logistical importance for Ottoman interests in North Africa, the Hijaz, and the Indian Ocean. Its massive tax revenue status within the empire. Egypt is the only province with its own Mühimme collection, for example. It was hence one of the empire's largest, richest, and most important provinces. It proves central therefore to examining the empire's overall history, how the empire shaped Egypt but also how Egypt shaped the empire, an empire, we must remember, that was rural above everything. We are blinded by cities such as Istanbul and Cairo. To understand the histories of most Ottomans, we have to get out of them. For understanding important topics such as labor, disease, infrastructure, population dynamics, and agricultural practices, Egypt is one of the Ottoman Empire's best laboratories.



Dilara Avcı: How do you situate environmental history within Ottoman history?

Alan Mikhail: I have already mentioned a few aspects here, but let me expand on this a bit more historiographically. The contemporaneous end of the Cold War and the cultural turn produced a strong culturalist bent in Ottoman Studies. In an increasingly unipolar world in the 1990s and early 2000s, the, we might call them; *realpolitik* concerns of previous decades seemed to fall away. One side winning meant there were no longer rival worldviews, no longer more than one way to view the place of people in the present and in the past. One *culture* seemed to have won and that needed attention and explanation. Very soon thereafter, late capitalist neoliberal attempts to melt away the institutions and structures that had propped up those rival worldviews made an understanding of how cultural agency worked within and thanks to structures of the twentieth century and before less exigent. A kind of generalized globalist monoculture of the sort hinted at by Fukuyama and others was thus meant to—triumphantly, in the view of many—collapse difference and specificity. Culture floated away from

structure. Once unmoored from the structural politics of the day, culture could then be put towards other ends. One of these was cultural history.

For Ottoman and other Middle East historians, this all hit at a particular time. In the 1980s and 1990s, the academic infrastructure of area studies and Orientalist modes of analysis lingered. Those receiving their PhDs, mostly in the United States and some in Europe, in the last two decades of the twentieth century were mostly trained by those who had been trained as Orientalists in the 1960s and 1970s. These students in the eighties and nineties had to grapple with Said's critique from the very start of their careers; some accepted it, others did not. Pre-Saidian Orientalism was far from over. Indeed, it probably still dominated. It was thus only their students, those trained in the early twenty-first century, for whom the Saidian critique was fully in the water they drank. The point I want to make is that the turn to cultural history unmoored from structural analyses dovetailed with Orientalist methods if not outright Orientalist worldviews in the late eighties and the nineties. This meant that the culturalists in Ottoman history sought answers for political and economic questions *in culture*, very much as the Orientalists had before them, while also using the tools of Orientalism: reading the corpus of individual scholars, or even sometimes single texts, to understand complicated polities and societies. This all bore the hallmarks of Orientalism—an emphasis on expository, literary, and religious texts rather than more archivally driven economic and social history; overly specific, even obscurantist, philological analysis; translation; literary exegeses of various kinds. Lost in text over reality.

As Said noted, in part because of its proximity to Europe, the Middle East has always been quick to latch onto Europe, empirically, conceptually, methodologically, or all of the above, and again there might be good reason for this, but there is also good reason to work beyond this as well. The comparison to Europe nearly always immediately puts the Ottoman world in the defensive position of having to explain why it "deviated" from Europe or was "just like it," with both of these modes quickly leading into essentialist culturalist inquiries instead of allowing us to focus on the foundational elements of the economy or governance or the like. The question of whether or not Orientalist methods might be put to non-Orientalist ends is an open one that most of culturalists do not consider but should. In any case, the point is that neither in method nor result were these works able to answer any big questions about politics or the economy, the structure of society, or even change overtime. They are analyses of cultural products that illuminate what those texts, images, and buildings are, how they were produced, their reception, and so on, but that say little more beyond that. There are many pretty stories about pretty things.

The insularity of these works, more nefariously, bolstered cultural nationalisms of all kinds. The notion that Arab or Persian or Turkish—rarely Ottoman—culture somehow had imbedded within it the seeds of a kind of politics or religiosity is the exact kind of essentialist Orientalism of the early twentieth century. Regrettably, this

kind of work in the culturalist mode of Ottoman Studies continues, much of it serving, perhaps sometimes unwittingly, these essentialist ends.

When the culturalists did address economic or otherwise structural matters, they did so in ways that advanced an elitist sense of class. They tended to obsess over a small number of global merchants or imperial intellectuals from the early modern period. They might be spectacular to some bourgeois continent-hopping modern academics, but they are more representative of them than they are of the past. More insidiously, a focus on such non-representative historical actors suggests that the world was a kind of free-flowing arena of seamless economic affairs in which power did not exist and actors were free to trade across polities, regions, religions, and societies. Only those free of the subjections of power could buy in to such a neoliberal, *avant la lettre*, view of history. Our attention instead should be on the majority of historical actors, not the exceptions, a small group of elites, whether they be merchants, intellectuals, or religious figures. In the past, the majority was the mass of agrarian cultivators across multiple imperial spheres, including the Ottoman.

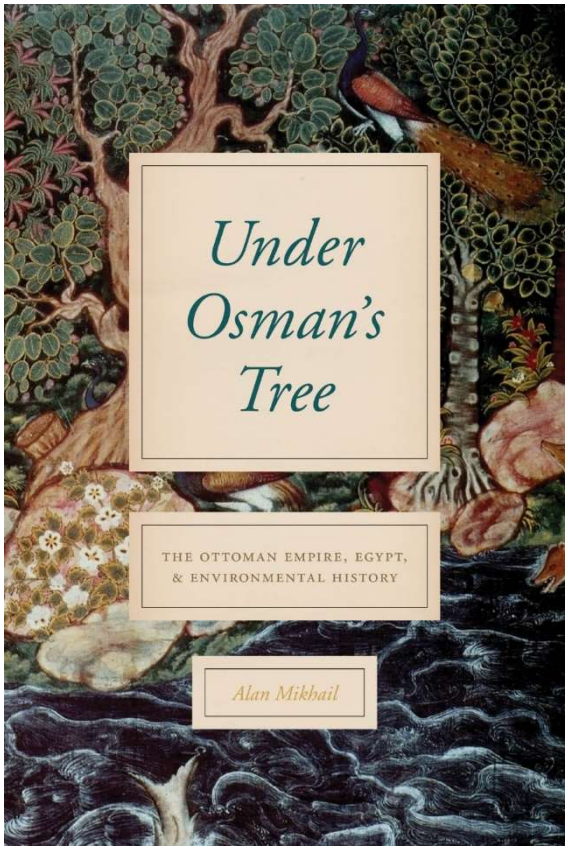
With its Orientalism, essentialism, insularity, and elitism, culturalist historiography is an impoverished myopic view of history, Ottoman or otherwise. Work of the culturalist sort cannot answer big questions. The hyper-particularist Orientalist or the bland dilettantish interests of old focused on single texts, individual scholars, religious orders, and so on are too often too specialized and focused on disconnected cultural topics that might interest a scholar or two but have no real implications for a wider sense of politics, the economy, or any other structural element of society. What are the economic, political, ecological, and social bases on which are built this cultural work, on which it relies? To use a Braudelian analogy, it is the deep ocean currents of politics and the economy that allow for the froth of culture to float on the surface. These deeper forces are precisely those that have been lost in the culturalist-Orientalist gruel stirred since the 1980s, empty calories that have bloated the field and made it sluggish.

We need, if you will, a defter ology.

To my mind, to get to your question directly, environmental history, work being done under the broad umbrella of political economy, histories of capitalism, and studies of infrastructure or migration are some of the areas that prove most fruitful for moving the field forward to more productive areas of research and scholarship, to the bigger, more important questions of society, the economy, and politics—the material conditions of history, life, thought, and action. Topics such as food production, the mobilization of resources, the movement of populations, and the political economy of these processes are foundational to understanding any society and any empire, including the Ottoman Empire.

To place ourselves in our moment, as I did for previous generations, I think the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, as a kind of end to the post-1989 neoliberal fantasy, looms large here. Coupled with America's many wars in the Middle East and

Muslim world, it became increasingly difficult to buy that globalization would lead to a seamless flow of culture and resources. Indeed, instead we have gaping wealth disparities, the rise of ethnonationalisms, and migration crises across the world. Covid and the kind of imperial land grab represented by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, all in the context of ecological crisis, bring us to a moment in which, I think, scholars should be reflecting more on questions concerning economic structures, ecological systems, racial capitalism, and political agency, focusing more on the material and economic foundations of societies, on land and food, on the energetic bases of our lives, on the history of empires and how long-term political structures and inequalities linger in the present. This is all very rough on my part and far more complicated, of course, but the point again is to stress the fundamental importance of issues such as political economy, infrastructure, and resource mobilization that make environmental history and other areas of work crucial for understanding Ottoman history, far beyond a focus on culture or intellectual history.



Dilara Avcı: "Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Environmental History" is very important for the study of Ottoman environmental history and is a groundbreaking work for the field. It and more recently "Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History" have been published in Turkish, both by İşbank. What are your thoughts on these books being translated to Turkish?

Alan Mikhail: Well, first and foremost, I must thank the translator of both books, Seda Özdil. She is an incredibly brilliant person and a creative thinker (she is, for example, also the translator of "Dubliners"), and I am truly honored that she was interested enough in my work to devote her time and energy to translating these books. I am of course thrilled that the books have been translated into Turkish. This allows them to reach Turkish readers in a much more direct and accessible way. The translations open up opportunities for engagement with new audiences, which is something I deeply appreciate and celebrate.

Dilara Avcı: "The Animal in Ottoman Egypt" is also a significant book. Could you tell us something about this book?

Alan Mikhail: This book has not (yet?) been translated into Turkish, but it is a significant part of my work. The book explores the crucial role that animals played in

Egypt's agricultural and irrigation systems during the Ottoman period. Before working on my first book, I had not thought about nonhuman animals too much. That is, I had not considered just how central they were to the topics I cared about. However, as I started to delve into the sources, I realized how integral they were to the functioning of the agrarian economy and the broader social structures of Ottoman Egypt. Animals were involved in almost every aspect of agricultural labor—whether it was turning water wheels, plowing fields, or transporting goods to markets. They were essential actors in maintaining the infrastructure that supported food production. They also represented a significant form of capital in a society where land ownership was limited for many people and were hence some of the most valuable forms of wealth, a key economic resource, and enmeshed in all the intricate economic relationships of life.

The book does not just focus on domesticated work animals though. Dogs are the second broad category I was interested in. They were important in urban contexts, especially in relation to sanitation, cleanliness, and the regulation of public health. I saw them as key players in the history of the emergence of the modern state and its efforts to impose certain forms of order in urban spaces.

Lastly, I explore charismatic megafauna—"exotic" animals like giraffes, elephants, lions, and tigers. These were animals that in the early modern period, as before, were exchanged as diplomatic gifts between royal courts that maintained menageries or other forms of animal display. In the nineteenth century, the growing economy of the animal trade fueled by the rise of the zoological park changed the economic calculus that shaped the global movement of these animals. So in examining how this trade shifted over a few centuries, I track not only what this meant for these animals' and their companion humans' lives, but also the ways in which the Ottoman Empire engaged with the emerging global capitalist economy and how this linked places like Egypt and Istanbul to broader networks of exchange and imperial power.

I argue in the book that each of these categories—domesticated work animals, dogs, and exotic megafauna—reflects a different aspect of Egypt's transition from an early modern society to a more capitalist, modern one in the nineteenth century. In the case of domesticated animals, the focus is on labor, land, and capital; with dogs, I study changing urban anxieties surrounding hygiene, disease, and state surveillance; and the larger animals tell a story of changing global trade. Each class of animal requires a slightly different chronology of analysis: from the early Islamic period in the case of dogs, for example, or into the twentieth century for the history of the zoological park. The overall purpose is to understand how Egyptians' relationships to animals and the environment evolved as part of broader political, economic, and social transformations, particularly across the period of Ottoman early modern rule into the modern era of Mehmet 'Ali's state. This book, therefore, attempts to offer a unique

perspective on Egypt's transition to modernity and highlights the importance of environmental and animal studies in understanding historical change.

Dilara Avcı: How do you think about periodization generally? Are there differences in doing the environmental history of the early modern Ottoman Empire versus the late empire?

Alan Mikhail: This is a really important question, and it builds nicely on what we were just discussing. Much of my work in environmental history has focused on the period from around 1750 to 1850, a time that is often viewed as a transition from the early modern to the modern period. The traditional narrative we have about this transition usually centers around key historical figures—figures like Mehmet 'Ali, Selim III, or Napoleon. There is *still* a tendency to treat these rulers as central agents of change in the empire. This is obviously unsatisfying. In my work, I try to focus on the deeper, broader structural transformations, particularly in the agricultural realm that might help us to better explain these complex phenomena. In the case of Egypt, we see significant changes at the turn of the nineteenth century in crop cultivation patterns, labor practices, the use of animals in agriculture, and in the broader economic relationships tied to these changes. These shifts, I argue, tell a story of agrarian transformation that helps us understand the transformation of Ottoman society.

I'm obviously also interested in the other end of the early modern period, its beginning. That is why my book "God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World" focuses so heavily on the years 1516-1517, when Selim conquered the Mamluk Empire and brought Egypt and other territories into the Ottoman fold. To me, 1517 is the moment to focus on as the start of the early modern empire. This is in some ways an argument against 1453 as *the* pivotal turning point for Ottoman early modern history. Let me explain.

Accepting 1453 as a conventional beginning is a choice invested in thinking of the Ottoman Empire as a European state, as the successor of the Eastern Roman Empire, as a polity orientated to the west. The simple pivot to 1517, as innocuous as this might seem at first, opens up an entirely different early modern history for the empire. Instead of obsessing over Europe, we can look elsewhere, more to the east, if you will. For four hundred years of the empire's six-hundred-year history, the majority of its territories, peoples, and tax revenues hailed from the regions of Greater Syria, eastern Anatolia, and North Africa. From 1517 to the early twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire was, on balance, geographically, economically, and through links of resource and human movement, a Syrian, Anatolian, and North African empire. No honest accounting of Ottoman history can afford to ignore this reality, and yet nothing of the sort of culturalist Golden Age obsessions we discussed earlier speaks to this, even as none of it would exist without these geographic and economic realities. Getting out of the Balkans and Istanbul and into the majority of the empire for the

majority of its history is thus both more historically accurate and more inclusive. And the chronological corrective to 1517 helps us to do that.

1517 changed the empire more than any other date in Ottoman history. With decades of preparation and conquest, Constantinople was going to come one way or another. It almost happened a few times before 1453, so the conquest in many ways represented the filling in of the empire's obvious—wholly significant, no doubt—hole. It was not a fundamental change though. 1517, by contrast, was. Staging a competition between important dates, or sultans, is silly, of course. The significance of 1517 is far deeper.

1517 helps us to explain, for example, the expansion and development of law and governance in the sixteenth century. Süleyman became the lawgiver *because* he had to rule his newly expansive empire. The political treatises of the period and after would have been radically different without the changed realities of 1517. There would be no Evliya Çelebi without 1517. He died in Cairo, after all. There would be no Ottoman Caliphate. No trade in the Indian Ocean. All of these massively significant strands of Ottoman historiography depend on the moment of 1517. New points of origin, as skeptical as we should be about narratives of origin, offer new interpretative opportunities.

Beyond being an empirically more honest representation of Ottoman history, dwelling with 1517 allows us to overcome many entrenched divides in the field. One is the divide between those Ottomanists who work mostly in Turkish sources and those historians of the early modern Arab world who work primarily in Arabic sources. That latter formulation—historians of the early modern Arab world—is a deliberate one as so many of them do not consider themselves to be Ottomanists. This is the result both of anti-Turkish sentiment in the modern Arab world and that Ottomanists have been slow, or even antagonistic, to considering the Arab world as a part of Ottoman history.

1517 also helps us to overcome much of the Eurocentrism that still, despite everything, plagues the field. Part of the reason Ottoman historians have held up 1453 over 1517, in addition to Christendom's infusing this loss with so much meaning, is that it was the defeat of a Christian empire and therefore the passing of the baton from Christians (and Romans) to Ottomans, making the point that the Ottoman Empire (read Turkish Republic) was European. For so long and still actively today, so much of Ottoman history has sought to import from Europe, methodologically and conceptually. This lazy impoverishment of thought is obvious and much commented on. Less understood is what this has meant for truly understanding what the empire was, especially after 1517. We should be looking more to the east, not to the west. Indeed, the refusal of 1517 points to a nonrecognition of the place of the Arab world in Ottoman history, never mind of Africa in Ottoman history. After 1517, the empire's center of gravity floated east and south. It was no longer the primarily European and Christian empire it had been before but now ever increasingly Arab and Muslim. This

is a seemingly difficult reality for many Ottomanists to admit, never mind study. This refusal has to do again with the field's dominant Eurocentrism.

1517 is thus largely a missed opportunity to imagine a different empire. It offers the chance to expand the geography of analysis into new areas that open up new cultures, texts, sources, and commodities. With such novel empirical material, we have the bases for new imaginings of what the empire was and what its historiography can be, new methodological insights and new conceptual frameworks. The Turkish Republic, and its Eurocentrism, holds too much sway in thinking about Ottoman history. What might it meant to think of the Ottoman Empire as an Arab Empire? I know this suggestion will irk some, but we must account for the fact that Arabs and Arabic-speaking peoples were some of the largest groups within the empire for four hundred years. What would it mean to seriously center this in the historiography of the empire? I might offer that Ottoman historiography could usefully focus on the Arab world to try to break out of some of its straightjackets. This is just one of any number of ideas for different Ottoman chronologies and how to get there. Ultimately, I believe that the way we periodize Ottoman history—whether we focus on 1453, 1517, or 1750—has a profound impact on how we understand the empire. It is not just about changing dates on a timeline; it is about rethinking the processes—environmental, economic, what have you—that shaped the empire's transformations overtime, about offering new chronologies and putting dominant narratives under pressure. Instead of just nibbling on the edges of a chronology that moves from 1453 to a sixteenth-century Golden Age of empires into a slumber before industrialization, capitalism, and Enlightenment woke up the empire to meet the morning of modernity and reform, let's imagine something else entirely. 1517, to my mind, offers a potential beginning for this needed work. Call it the 1517 project, a new orientation meant to change everything.

Dilara Avcı: What is the current state of Ottoman environmental history?

Alan Mikhail: Well, wonderful I would say! I think we are in a very good place. I look to scholars like yourself and everyone involved in the "Anadolu ve Türk Tarihi'nde Hayvanlar Konferansı," one of many environmentally themed conferences over the past few years. Environmental history, and related fields such as energy and infrastructure history, are gaining increasing attention, not just in Ottoman Studies but across the broader field of Middle Eastern history and are helping these fields to argue for the importance of the empire and the Middle East in broader discussions in history and other disciplines. There have been numerous important books published recently that explore these themes. I cannot name them all, of course, and I apologize profusely that I will be forgetting significant works. But look to the publications of scholars such as Faisal Husain, Zozan Pehlivan, Samuel Dolbee, Elizabeth Williams, Michael Christopher Low, Onur İnal, Can Nacar, Yonca Köksal, and Chris Gratien. There are again many others as well. In different ways and across different geographies and chronologies, all are expanding our understanding of Ottoman environmental history. There is a lot of interesting work coming out, and I think that is fantastic. The field is

quite strong, and there is a real energy to the scholarship. I am excited to see where it goes in the coming years!

Dilara Avcı: Hocam, you teach at Yale University. What is the place of environmental history in your teaching?

Alan Mikhail: At Yale, I teach a range of courses, primarily focused on Middle Eastern and Ottoman history, Mediterranean history, Islam and the Atlantic, and other related fields. While most of the courses I teach are not specifically about environmental history, I often incorporate environmental themes into broader historical narratives. For many students, especially those who may not be familiar with the history of the Middle East, environmental history provides an accessible entry point into understanding the region. Rather than overwhelming students with complex political, social, or religious histories right away, I can begin with something more tangible and perhaps more familiar to students with no background in Middle East history—like ideas about nature, processes related to food production, or the relationship between humans and the natural world. This approach allows students to relate to the material by attempting to humanize the past, making it feel closer and hopefully more accessible.

At the same time, a key responsibility in teaching the environmental history of the Middle East is to dispel many of the environmental stereotypes that maintain about the region—oil, deserts, camels, and other exoticisms. Many students come to class with preformed ideas. Environmental history is actually quite useful in breaking down these simplistic views by fleshing out the many complex and rich relationships between peoples and environments across the many varied landscapes of the Middle East.

Ultimately, environmental history in my teaching is about finding ways to allow students to connect to the material by focusing on more universal issues they might not always associate with the Middle East. They thus gain not only a deeper understanding of the Middle East but also develop more holistic and interconnected views of the world's past.

As the scholarly field continues to grow and develop, I imagine we will see more environmental history in Middle East history courses and more synthetic books treating Ottoman environmental history or Middle Eastern environmental history in ways productive for classroom use.

Dilara Avcı: Hocam, thank you so much for your time and interest.

Alan Mikhail: You're welcome Dilara.

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