

Onur İnal

***Gateway to the Mediterranean: An Environmental History of Late Ottoman
Izmir***

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In *Gateway to the Mediterranean*, Onur İnal offers a richly textured environmental history of late Ottoman Izmir that reorients how historians understand port cities, hinterlands and capitalist integration in the nineteenth-century Eastern Mediterranean. Moving decisively beyond core-periphery models and urban-centred narratives, İnal advances the concept of the ‘gateway city’ to capture the mutually constitutive relationship between Izmir and its Western Anatolian hinterland. The book’s central thesis is that Izmir’s rise as the Ottoman Empire’s principal Mediterranean export hub was not simply the result of external market forces or imperial trade policies, but rather of a dynamic, evolving ecological and economic relationship between city and countryside. Izmir functioned as a ‘gateway’ not only in commercial terms but also as an ecological interface through which humans, animals, crops, pathogens and technologies circulated. This approach allows İnal to treat Western Anatolia not as a passive supplier of raw materials, but as an active landscape shaped by migration, animal power, transport infrastructures and agrarian specialisation. The book challenges long-standing historiographical tendencies that isolate port cities from their rural environments or reduce hinterlands to abstract economic zones.

Methodologically, the book exemplifies environmental history at its most integrative. İnal combines archival research in Ottoman, British, French and Greek sources with insights from animal studies, migration history and historical geography. His sources range from state correspondence and consular reports to agricultural statistics, maps, commercial advertisements and visual materials. Taken together, these diverse materials allow him to reconstruct environmental change across multiple scales: from imperial policy and commercial networks to everyday practices on the ground.

Gateway to the Mediterranean is organised thematically rather than chronologically, allowing İnal to trace overlapping processes of ecological and economic change. Early chapters (chap. 1 and 2) address disasters, disease and demographic movement, highlighting how earthquakes, epidemics and refugee influxes reshaped Izmir and its hinterland. These chapters situate environmental instability at the centre of Ottoman modernisation rather than as episodic disruptions. Refugees from the Crimea and the Caucasus, for example, appear not only as victims of imperial conflict but also as agents of agrarian transformation whose settlement altered land use, labour relations and ecological pressures.

One of the book’s most original contributions lies in its treatment of animal power. İnal’s chapter on hybrid camels (chap. 3) demonstrates how animal

breeding, mobility and endurance underpinned long-distance trade before, and alongside, the expansion of railways. Camels emerge as historical actors whose biological capacities shaped transport routes, labour regimes and commercial rhythms. This analysis complicates linear narratives of technological progress by showing how animal and mechanical systems coexisted and interacted well into the late nineteenth century.

Infrastructure occupies a central place in the book, particularly in the discussion of railways. Rather than presenting railroads as purely modernising technologies imposed from above, İnal situates them within existing ecological and labour systems (chap. 4). Railway construction reshaped landscapes, redirected commodity flows, and reconfigured relations between producers, merchants and exporters, but it did not simply replace older modes of transport. Instead, railways intensified Izmir's gateway function by extending its reach deeper into Anatolia while also producing new environmental stresses and spatial inequalities.

Agrarian chapters on grain, cotton, figs and raisins (chap. 5, 6 and 8) offer a compelling account of how global demand reshaped local ecologies. İnal demonstrates how monocropping, export-oriented agriculture and commodity standardisation transformed soils, labour practices and rural livelihoods. His discussion of figs and raisins is particularly strong, tracing how biological processes, processing techniques and quality controls became embedded in global commodity chains. These chapters engage environmental historians concerned with the ecological transformations wrought by capitalism and the commodification of the natural world.

The final chapter (chap. 8) return to the city itself, examining how Izmir's urban space was reshaped through port expansion, warehousing, sanitation projects and coastal engineering. Here, the 'gateway' metaphor gains spatial concreteness: quays, entrepôts and transport corridors materialised the city's intermediary role between land and sea. Environmental modification, such as the diversion of rivers and reclamation of coastal land, appears as both a consequence of economic growth and a source of new vulnerabilities.

The book's principal strength lies in its seamless integration of environmental analysis with economic and urban history, without subordinating one to the other. İnal demonstrates that environmental forces were not passive backdrops but dynamic agents shaping historical change. He reconceptualises the Ottoman port city as an ecological interface rather than a mere peripheral node of European capitalism, weaving together rural production, animal labour, disease and infrastructure into a cohesive account of transformation. The study also advances multispecies perspectives within Ottoman historiography, treating camels, microbes, crops and insects as materially consequential actors. At the same time, it situates Western Anatolia within Mediterranean and global markets while avoiding reductive dependency frameworks.

REVIEWS

Despite its impressive archival depth and analytical range, the book's ambition occasionally produces a density that may challenge readers. Inal masterfully reconstructs commodity chains, transport systems, migration patterns, administrative reforms and ecological processes; yet the cumulative weight of empirical detail can at times obscure the larger interpretive arc. Particularly in the chapters on agricultural transformation and export commodities, the proliferation of statistics, place names and micro-level developments risks overwhelming the conceptual framework introduced in the opening chapters. Some readers may wish for more frequent analytical signposting to clarify how these richly textured case studies advance the broader claims about ecological integration and the 'gateway' model.

While the study draws inspiration from environmental history and multispecies approaches and richly documents environmental transformation, it is less explicit about how ecological change intersected with structures of authority, dispossession and uneven environmental burdens tied to land use, infrastructure and agrarian commercialisation. A similar tension appears in its treatment of nonhuman actors: the chapter on hybrid camels compellingly theorises animals as infrastructural mediators shaping spatial and economic formations, whereas other ecological actors; such as plague microbes or pollinating fig wasps, remain more illustrative than analytically developed. A more sustained reflection on power, agency and interspecies entanglement would have clarified how diverse human and nonhuman actors operated within shared ecological systems and strengthened the book's contribution to multispecies environmental history.

Finally, while the gateway model is persuasive in the case of Izmir – and the author gestures toward comparisons with other eastern Mediterranean cities – its broader applicability remains an open question. Can it illuminate other Ottoman or Mediterranean ports such as Salonica, Beirut or Alexandria? Or does Izmir's particular geography and agricultural wealth make it an exceptional case? Perhaps this opens a productive avenue for environmental historians to further explore the model's applicability in other port cities, tracing how commerce, ecology and infrastructure converged in distinct yet interconnected Mediterranean settings.

These reservations, however, do little to diminish the book's overall achievement. *Gateway to the Mediterranean* provides a powerful template for writing urban environmental history that fully integrates hinterlands, nonhuman actors and ecological dynamics. It marks a major contribution to Ottoman environmental historiography, skilfully connecting urban development with rural transformation, infrastructure with animal labour, and commodity production with migration. It compellingly illustrates how ports operate as environmental engines, reshaping territories well beyond their waterfronts.

NURÇİN İLERİ

International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam