“Köylü milletin efendisidir” (villagers are the master of the nation) is one of the most popular and well-known sayings of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. Atatürk made this statement in the conclusion of a speech before the First National Assembly in Ankara on March 1, 1922, in which he spoke about the question of sovereignty and the source of sovereign authority. This speech was given in an intense political atmosphere dominated by the ongoing War of Independence (1919-23) against Greece and its allies, as the ghosts of the centuries-old Ottoman sultan and caliphate hovered over Istanbul. Though it has been more than a century since that speech, this slogan continues to be recycled by politicians in Turkey to demonstrate the prominence of the agrarian economy to the nation’s well-being and rural development. In October 2022, the leader of the Republican People Party and the presidential candidate of the opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, reiterated the same mantra by affirming that “we will make the villager(s) the master of the nation again.”[1] Was Turkey and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, always the land of villagers? Wer-en’t pastoralists a considerable portion of the Ottoman population up until the early twentieth century? When did peasants overcome millions of pastoralists to become “the master of the nation”? What kind of historical processes generated this socioeconomic, political, and environmental transformation in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey? In The Unsettled Plain: An Environmental History of the Late Ottoman Frontier, environmental historian Chris Gratien tackles these issues, narrating a hundred-year-long (1850s-1950s) clandestine history of state-led “agrarian conquest,” villagization, and commercialization of agriculture in the muddy but fertile lowland of Çukurova (historical Cilicia) and its mountainous hinterland in southern Anatolia.[2] The Unsettled Plain is an important contribution to the constantly growing field of environmental history of the Middle East in general and the Ottoman Empire in particular.[3]

In The Unsettled Plain, Gratien situates Çukurova in the context of global frontier studies and
traces its large-scale environmental, economic, and sociopolitical transformation and its wide-ranging human and nonhuman actors, including Ottoman officials, pastoralists, refugees, seasonal laborers, migrants, livestock, mosquitoes, malaria, and local cotton. Gratien identifies Çukurova as an ecological frontier containing a complex environment and a multilayered web of social, economic, and political relations. In doing so, he suggests an alternative notion of the frontier that does not have a prevalent geographic demarcation or a political borderland but rather depicts “pockets of transformation within the Ottoman provinces” constituting diverse political ecologies.[4] The frontier in Çukurova, Gratien argues, was a “frontier of the state,” “a settlement frontier,” and an “ecological frontier.” In the first frontier, the Ottoman state and its varied practices of governmentality played an engineering role in remaking the rural world, while in the second, forced sedentarization (iskan in Turkish) policies were imposed on the region’s pastoralists and their millions of herd animals whose livelihood depended on seasonal migration between the lowlands and highlands. In the “ecological frontier,” besides “novel plants, microbes, and diseases,” a mesh of old and new practices, such as “methods of land use, modes of agrarian production, forms of resource extraction, and environmental understandings” appeared “in tandem with the processes of state-building, settlement, and commercialization.” In depicting Çukurova as a late Ottoman frontier, Gratien encourages us to go beyond the conventional understanding of frontier to comprehend the role of social, economic, political, and environmental factors together in a “common story” in “the remaking of Ottoman society” (p. 14).

Gratien uses the concept of “mobility” as a connecting thread to investigate socioeconomic, political, and environmental transformations across this late Ottoman frontier. The mobility of people connected the lowland to the highland pastures, pastoralists to livestock, migrant laborers to cotton, merchants to global capitalism, Muslim refugees to trans-imperial warfare, mosquitoes to dreadful malaria, the “rebels” to the mountains, and finally technocrats to the swampy Çukurova. Transhumance migration, referring to seasonal migration between northern and southern pastures, is the first and perhaps one of the most common forms of mobility embedded in this region. Gratien argues that historically climate and geography regulated the mobility of pastoralist and non-pastoralist residents of Çukurova. The fresh upland air, known as yayla in Turkish, was a green sanctuary for locals escaping extremely humid and unhealthy malarial lowlands during the hot summer months. During the mid-nineteenth century, the dynamic of this seasonal relationship to lowland swamps shifted with the imposition of Ottoman modernist reform policies intended to turn Çukurova into a “second Egypt” through cotton production. As a result of provincial reforms and the growing centralization capacity of the empire thanks to the Tanzimat reforms (1839-76), the Ottoman state began to forcefully settle the local pastoralist communities that were seen as obstacles to state-led agricultural development projects in the region and as a potential labor reserve for the cultivation of cotton on the “fertile lands” of Cilicia.[5] Ottoman reformists viewed “settlement and cultivation” as “the only antitode of the malarial wastelands of the Ottoman countryside” (p. 58). Gratien chronicles widespread “malaria, cholera, and other diseases” as outcomes of resettlement and villagization and argues that from the 1850s onward these vector-borne diseases resulted in “high mortality” among the residents of Cilicia (p. 69).

Pastoralists were not the only mobile community with an assigned role within futuristic Ottoman visions for swampy Çukurova. Muslim refugees (muhacir in Turkish)—mainly Circassian and Chechen communities experiencing extreme violence in their homelands in the Russian Caucasus—arriving in Ottoman lands were resettled across the empire through Ottoman demographic engineering policies. This meant more inhabitants
for Çukurova’s fertile but muddy unhealthy plain, inhabited by a diverse multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural population. Though the Ottomans’ forced sedentarization policy toward pastoralists and resettlement of Muslim refugees were both designed to increase the commercialization of agriculture in Çukurova, they operated differently as instruments of the imperial state. Sedentarization included state-perpetrated violence in the form of massive military campaigns. Resettlement of refugees involved the strategic settlement of new loyal citizens among indigenous communities of the region whose own loyalty to the empire was seen as suspicious. Gratien explains the ecological and economic transformation of Çukurova as an outcome of Ottoman settlement efforts, chronicling the impact of the state-led agrarian conquest on the environment, public health, and demography in the region. According to Gratien, a demographic change occurred in parallel with the growth of commercial agriculture as about half a million seasonal laborers marching from Ottoman Kurdistan, Iraq, and Syria crowded the cotton fields.[6] During the early twentieth century, irreversible demographic shifts occurred as hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed during the Adana massacre in 1909 and then the Armenian genocide in 1915. With the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Armenians from their historical homelands into Syrian deserts for “putative security concerns,” Çukurova’s fertile lands, villages, and towns in Adana province were instead “permanently settled” with refugees from the Balkans and Anatolia who were identified as “Turks” by the nationalist government (p. 143). This was the second wave of an Ottoman demographic engineering project that started in the 1860s with the resettlement of Caucasian refugees in a region once heavily inhabited by Ottoman Armenians and Muslim pastoralists. As Gratien pointedly observes, the Ottoman decision to resettle Turkish-speaking refugees in Adana, rather than desperate Kurdish refugees who would later be returned to their regions of origin, was a significant political decision that would eventually contribute to the proletarianization of Kurds in modern Turkey.

Violence seems to be the second connecting thread of The Unsettled Plain. Gratien carefully investigates state-led violence against pastoralists instrumentalized by the massive military campaigns of the Fırka-i İslahiye (Reform Division). Violence against Armenians, however, is less thoroughly analyzed here. For example, although it is one of the largest anti-Armenian pogroms in the late Ottoman Empire, resulting in the deaths of thousands of local Armenians and the complete destruction of Armenian material culture in the Adana province, the “Horror of Adana” massacre of 1909 receives little attention.[7] Similarly, the Armenian genocide is examined only in the context of “mobilization and displacement” during World War I (p. 141). This prevents nonspecialist readers from understanding the long-term consequences of such violence on the environment, economy, and demography of Çukurova and Adana province.

The Unsettled Plain is an important addition to the fields of environmental history of the Middle East, late Ottoman history, and the history of modern Turkey. By consistently incorporating folk songs, laments, and oral accounts, Gratien not only eloquently displays pastoralists’ forms of resistance and resilience against the Ottoman reform movement in Çukurova but also masterfully narrates perceptions and worldviews that have been silenced in the state archive. This use of a wide range of unconventional historical sources makes The Unsettled Plain an innovative environmental history. Gratien’s unconventional approach to the idea of frontier and his interdisciplinary methodology make this monograph an important teaching tool for both graduate and undergraduate course contexts. Certainly, The Unsettled Plain is a refined contribution to global environmental history.

In The Unsettled Plain, Gratien provides a comprehensive answer to the questions I pose at
the beginning. In fact, modern Turkey and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, were not always the land of villagers but also of pastoralists and their millions of herd animals. It was the modernist policies of the empire and the new republic that made the peasants the master of nation. In this regard, Gratien's *Unsettled Plain* is extremely relevant to understand Turkey's socioeconomic policies and restrictions toward remaining pastoralists and securitization of their environment and pasturelands.[8]

Notes


[6]. Zozan Pehlivan, “Beyond ‘the Desert and the Sown’: Peasants, Pastoralists, and Climate Crises in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1840-1890” (PhD diss., Queen’s University, 2016), 29.


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