

Urban Cultures of Flower Breeding in Ottoman Istanbul

Aleksandar Shopov (New York)

Abstract:

In the seventeenth century, new varieties of fruits, vegetables, and flowers were created in the city's many agricultural spaces. During this same period, new genres of writings appeared related to flower-breeding: technical "how-to" manuals, which derived from an earlier tradition of agricultural treatises; encyclopaedias of flower varieties created in Istanbul; and biographical dictionaries of Istanbul flower-breeders. Such texts attempt to prescribe note-taking habits, agricultural timelines, and observational techniques related to their propagation. The creation of different shapes, sizes, and colors of flowers are credited to the work of individuals residing in the city and its neighboring towns. What can the texts tell us about the practice of creating new floral varieties? Were such texts an attempt to control the proliferation of new flower varieties and practitioners in the city? What was the relationship between the recorded genealogies of flowers, the prescribed techniques of seeding, and the flower industry in Istanbul? Flowers emerge from the texts as technological or human-made plants rather than things whose history unfolded only in Ottoman exchanges with western Europe. Taking flower breeding in Istanbul as a case study for the creation of urban natures, this paper focuses on the formation of discourses about the city's agricultural history, science, and technology.

Bio

Aleksandar Shopov is a historian with interests in the history of science and the social and environmental histories of the Ottoman Empire, with a focus on the period between 1400 and 1800. He received his PhD from Harvard University in 2016. He held a postdoctoral fellowship at the Annemarie Schimmel Colleg in Bonn, and has also held fellowships at Dumbarton Oaks Library in Washington, D.C., the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, Germany, and the Max Planck Institut for the History of Science in Berlin, Germany. He is currently writing a book about urban agriculture in Ottoman Istanbul. He is an Assistant Professor of Early Modern Ottoman History at Binghamton University (SUNY).