

Climate's Impact on Europeans through the Eyes of the Ottomans

Abstract

From Antiquity to the Enlightenment, the prevailing understanding was that the climate and the environment in which people lived had a profound effect on their personal appearance and temperament. Influential intellectuals such as Hippocrates, Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Ibn Khaldun employed this argument in their own works, attributing certain characteristics and behavioral patterns to people living in the same geography. Whilst criticized on the grounds that it is overly reductionist in nature, this understanding is today referred to by different names in the literature, namely, geographical, environmental, and climatic determinism. This presentation, however, will not deal with this particular discussion but instead seeks to shed light on what the Ottoman literary class of the Early Modern Era thought on this topic. It will focus, therefore, on the works of the authors who, having traveled to Europe and laid out how they interpreted the relationship between climate and societies, wrote on climate's impact on human physical appearance, behavior, and temperament. Such knowledge will provide valuable insight into how notions of climate helped mold Ottoman authors' perceptions of Europeans.

Short Bio

Currently, on sabbatical as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Vienna, Şeyma Benli is an assistant professor of Ottoman Turkish and Islamic Turkish Literature at Istanbul Medeniyet University. After having received her B.A. in Theology from Marmara University, she completed her M.A. and PhD in Turkish Studies at Istanbul University. Benli has published numerous articles exploring the depths of Ottoman literature—her main research area—focusing specifically on cultural history, comparative literature, and ecocriticism. She has authored *Klasik Türk Edebiyatında Münazara: Sümerlerden Osmanlılara Bitmeyen Tartışmaların Hikayesi* (İstanbul: DBY, 2021), *A Unique Maqama in Ottoman Literature: Debate between a Fluent Woman and an Eloquent Young Husband by Nev'îzâde 'Atâyî* (İstanbul: Libra, 2021), and *17. Yüzyıldan Bir Şair Savunusu: Mehmed Hâsib'in İbrahim Tırsî'yi Müdafaası* (İstanbul: DBY, 2023). Her one-year postdoctoral research project, conducted under the supervision of Gisela Prochazka-Eisl, is titled *Narratives on Early Modern European Climate in Ottoman Literature* and supported by TÜBİTAK. In addition to this ongoing project, Benli is in the process of writing a monograph on Judeo-Ottoman poets with Edith G. Ambros.