

INTERVIEW: ON ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY WITH FAISAL HUSAIN

Dilara AVCI*

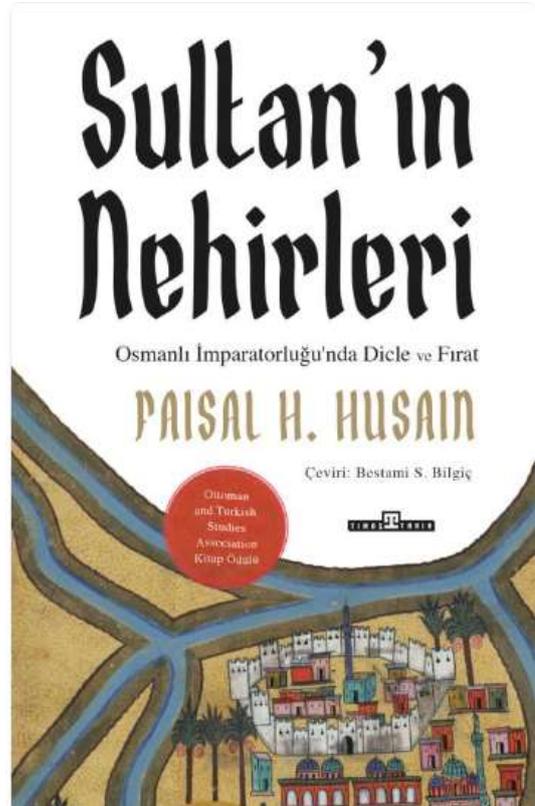
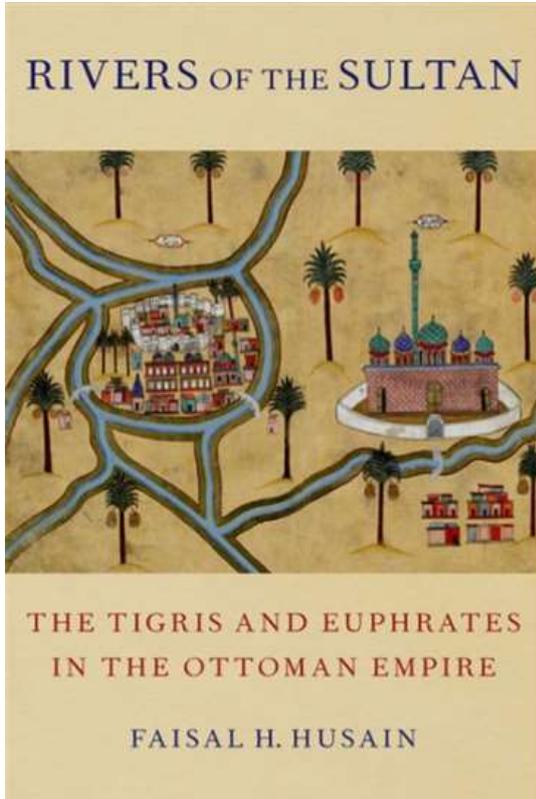


Faisal Husain's Biography

He is an environmental historian of the Ottoman Empire, with a geographical focus on its eastern provinces in Anatolia and Iraq. He wrote his master thesis in Yale University, and then he continued his Ph.D. in at Georgetown University.

His first book "Rivers of the Sultan: The Tigris and Euphrates in the Ottoman Empire" was published by "Oxford University Press" in 2021. In addition to this, Timaş Publishing translated this book into Turkish in 2023.

Faisal Husain was in Kırşehir between 18-20 May. He gave us an interview, and we explore the neighborhood with him. We traveled to Hacibektaş, Kapadokya and Avanos.



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Interview

Dilara Avcı: Your studies are mainly related to environmental history. Who are your reasons for turning to this field?

Faisal Husain: There are the couple of reasons for why I choose to study environmental history. A big reason has to do with the time I started my graduate studies in 2011. 2011 was the special time for Ottoman studies because 2011 was the year when two very important books on environmental history came out. Alan Mikhail's book "Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt" and Sam White's book "Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire." Therefore, when I started my graduate studies in 2011, I saw those two books and I was inspired. These books are interesting and enjoyable, and they were having a big impact and I wanted to do something similar. Therefore, I decided to follow their example.

In addition, another reason why I choose to turn to the field of environmental history is that the entire world is experiencing an environmental crisis, which makes environmental issues relevant to all of us. The climate challenge, in particular, is the biggest challenge facing the world, according to many scientists and policy makers. I therefore wanted to do something relevant to our global environmental concerns because people could relate to these topics. Thus, I choose this field. To summarize, those are two important reasons why I choose to turn to this field. The time I started to my studies, when very important books came out and, I wanted to write about something that people are interested in, such as the environment.

Let me add a third reason I did not mention. This has to do with where I did my graduate program. I did my master's degree at Yale University and by accident; I met with Alan Mikhail, one of the most important figures in Ottoman environmental history and Ottoman early modern history. I saw him and read his works. Aside from meeting Professor Mikhail, Yale University in general has a very vibrant community of teachers and students working on environmental history. So, Yale was a very supportive environment. If I did my graduate studies at different time 2005 or 2006 and in the different university like the University of Arizona or Marmara University, I would not have become an environmental historian. Because in 2005 no one knew, what the environmental history was and in the University of Arizona or Marmara University, environmental history is not a strong field. So, turning to the field has a lot to do with when I started to my graduate studies, where I started to graduate studies, whom I met with and just the fact that I wanted to write about something that the public could relate to.

Dilara Avcı: What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing studies on the environmental history?

Faisal Husain: There are many advantages and disadvantages for doing environmental history. The advantages of doing environmental history are several. One of them is that normally in traditional (non-environmental) history; historians only study people, human beings. However, we know that we (humans) are not the

only species on earth. We share this world and planet with other species. We share this planet with animals, insects, plants, viruses, bacteria, and ecosystems. So the benefit of doing environmental history is that it gives us a more comprehensive and generous view of the world in which we are not alone, because we are not alone in this world. We must acknowledge non-humans in our work and give them space, because non-humans, such as animals and insects, shape history, just as humans do.

Another benefit of doing environmental history is that normally traditional (non-environmental) history is confined within national borders, like the histories of United States, histories of Germany, histories of Italy, histories of Turkey. These histories are all confined with the national borders. The nice thing about environmental history is that it allows us to look beyond national borders. So, we can study history across countries and adopt a multi-cultural and multi-national view of history because many ecosystems and peoples and animals move across the borders. For instance, the Maritsa River (Meriç Nehri) does not flow in one country, it is in Bulgaria, Turkey, and Greece. If you want to study Maritsa River, you have to look beyond national borders. Likewise, if you want to study the Mediterranean, you cannot confine yourself within one national border because many countries share this ecosystem, the ecosystem of the Mediterranean. Moreover, if you want to study climate and climate history, you must look beyond national borders. Because climatic issues impact countries on a regional scale or global scale.

To summarize, environmental history allows us to consider non-human actors and to look beyond national borders. Those are two important advantages, among others.

As for the disadvantages of doing environmental history, there are several but at that moment, I can think of just one of them. Sometimes, to write a good history, you need interesting characters and protagonists. You need a human character with flash and blood. It is like reading a novel. When you read a novel, you want interesting characters like Suleiman the Magnificent, Mehmed the Conqueror, Matrakçı Nasuh Pasha, Mimar Sinan, Hürrem Sultan, among others.

Doing environmental history, we study landscape, rivers, forests, and (sometimes) we are tempted to forget the human characters in our story. So, in many environmental histories, human characters are pushed to background because environmental historians are mostly focused on landscape, and this could lead to a boring kind of history without interesting human characters. People read about Tigris River, Maritsa River, or Danube River and they may ask: where are the people?

Dilara Avcı: What do you think about the increasing popularity of environmental history?

Faisal Husain: I think it is a good thing and there is never enough studies on any topic. For example, how many biographies of Jesus do we have? How many studies of the Şahname? So many. This is not a bad thing. Every generation deserves new and fresh perspectives on old topics.

It is important to note that the increasing popularity of environmental history is not only in Turkey, but environmental history is also gaining popularity across the world in North America, Europe, India, China, and elsewhere. Why are many scholars everywhere turning to environmental history? In part, the increasing popularity of environmental history has to do with the fact that we are living in the middle of an environmental crisis. Climate change threaten people all over the world. Nevertheless, climate change is only part of our environmental crisis. Other environmental problems we face include the problem of extinction. Many species (animals and insects) are disappearing. Their disappearance has a negative impact on us. In addition, our environmental crisis is worsened by pollution. We pollute our rivers, our air, and our seas. These changes (among others) are all parts of our general environmental crisis. Because of the relevance of environmental crisis that we have, historians everywhere and in every country are turning to environmental history.

I must add that historians are not alone in becoming increasingly interested in environmental topics. Scholars in almost every discipline, such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and literature, are writing about environmental topics. For example, in many universities today, scholars of literature teach courses on environmental literature (çevre edebiyatı).

Dilara Avcı: What does the environmental literature means?

Faisal Husain: Çevre edebiyatı is to read a novel, poem, or essay and to study the environmental themes in those literary forms. For example, you may read the Şahname and discuss the environmental themes in it. Scholars may ask: how did Firdevsi portray the environment in Şahname? Alternatively, how did Evliya Çelebi portray the environment in his Seyahatname? How did the Quran and Bible discuss animals? Did the Quran and Bible encourage people to treat animals kindly or is it the opposite?

To summarize, the increasing popularity of doing environmental history is not just only Turkey. It affects scholarship all over the world. It is not an issue related to environmental history because all disciplines are turning their attention to environmental topics not only in the field of history but also literature, art, and even theology.

Dilara Avcı: What do you think about the difficulties of doing environmental history of the classical period of the Ottoman history?

Faisal Husain: There are many difficulties. One difficulty is the dearth (scarcity or small number) of documents. In the classical period of Ottoman history, the documentary record is small compared to the period after the Tanzimat. Even before the Tanzimat Period, after Selim III, the number of Ottoman archival documents considerably increases. Ottoman bureaucracy became like a factory for producing paper. For historians working on the post-Selim III period, the problem is that there

are too many documents. Historians do not know where to start and what to look at. In some cases, reading all relevant documents may take a decade or more.

We have opposite problem in the Ottoman classical period. Documents are much fewer in number, especially in the 14th and 15th centuries. As you may know, with a few minor exceptions, we have virtually no Ottoman sources in the 14th century. This is why our first written references to the Ottomans come not from Ottoman authors, but from Byzantine authors. Therefore, those who want to study Ottoman history in the 14th century; Greek and Latin are very helpful. The earliest histories written by Ottoman authors date later, to the late 15th century. That is a problem. How can environmental historians study the classical period without many Ottoman documents? How can they study the Black Death for example? The documents are very few. You have to rely on Aşıkpaşazade who lived generations (in the 15th century) after the Black Death. Likewise, the Ottoman Archive in Kağıthane is not very helpful for historians working on the period before 1550. The bulk of Ottoman documents in the Ottoman Archive date to the Kanuni Sultan Süleyman period onwards.

This is one difficulty. Difficulty is the limited number of sources. We have the opposite problem in the period from Selim III onward. Those historians who want to study this period have so many documents that they do not know where to start and where to end.

Another problem is language. Ottoman language was very complicated because it was a salad of Persian, Arabic and Turkish. If you want to read those documents, you need some fluency in those languages. If you want to specialize in this period, you have to be familiar with all these three languages. Not everybody is willing to learn all these three languages. This is why we know much less about this period (before Selim III).

On the other hand, from Selim III and onwards, Ottoman bureaucratic language became more “purified” or simplified. It became more similar to modern Turkish. This is why, for most historians today, studying the post-classical period in Ottoman history (post Selim III) is much easier, and this is why we know more about this period than earlier periods in Ottoman history.

In short, those are two challenges I can think of. One of is that the historical documents are very limited. Another is the accessibility of language. Ottoman bureaucratic language is more complex in the classical period than the language of 19th century. In addition, 19th century onwards, you have many European sources, like English, German, Italian, etc., because European powers became more deeply involved in domestic Ottoman affairs. In the early modern period, on the other hand, European powers were not as deeply involved in Ottoman affairs and their sources are not as important as they become from the 19th century onward. Therefore, if you want to study how the Ottomans used the Danube River in the classical period, you must learn Ottoman Turkish. European sources will not be very helpful.

Dilara Avcı: What should be working method of an environmental history?

Faisal Husain: There could be many. There is no one correct working method. Each topic demands different methods. For example, if you want to write about environmental art, you follow one method that helps you interpret artistic sources. How nature was portrayed in painting and sculpture, for example? You follow a method that helps you answer these questions. If you are more interested in literature, you follow a different method. How do you interpret the representation of nature in poetry, for example? You adopt a method that helps you answer this question. If you are interested in agriculture, river history and climate history, you follow different methods.

In short, environmental history has different working methods. Which one to use depends on the topic? There is no one “correct” working method in environmental history because environmental history is a very broad discipline. No one gets to define what is the right way or wrong way of writing environmental history. Regardless of the method, the work should focus on the relationship between nature and society. This is normal and every field of study is flexible and can be pursued using different methods. For example, historians can study women and gender using different methods borrowed from sociology, political science, anthropology, art, among others.

Dilara Avcı: How did you choose your Ph.D topic?

Faisal Husain: I was first interested in Ottoman history because I took a class introduction to Islam and the teacher was of that class was an Ottoman historian. His name is Tolga Esmer. Even though the class is an introduction to the history of Islam, he only talked about Ottoman history. I really liked his lecture and his personality and wanted to pursue this field.

After choosing Ottoman history, I had many options to pursue. I chose to work on eastern Anatolia and Iraq because when I started my study, most of the work related to Ottoman history was confined within the Mediterranean region. I wanted to go deeper inland and see how did Ottoman rule looked like in Eastern Anatolia and Iraq, away from Mediterranean. I wanted to work on this region because I did not know much about it. Likewise, you (Dilara Avcı) are interested in the Maritsa River because there is not much related to the Maritsa River in the classical period of Ottoman history. You want to fill this gap.

Lastly, I chose to write an environmental history of Ottoman eastern Anatolia and Iraq because by accident, I met Alan Mikhail and I was inspired by him and by his work. Therefore, I wanted to study Ottoman history. I was really start to away from Mediterranean. Moreover, when I met with Alan Mikhail by accident, he is making impact and I want to something similar. He was working on Nile River and so I wanted to study Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

This is relevant to many of us. Our careers are really determined not only by the decision we make according to plan. Chance plays a big role in determining our scholarship and our lives' trajectory more broadly.

Dilara Avci: What are the difficulties you have while writing your Ph.D.?

Faisal Husain: First, I have to acknowledge that compared to other students, I had great privilege. I had more financial support from my American university (Georgetown) than most student in Turkey. Many Turkish students had more difficulties than I had. They had (and still have) to work part time to make money because their universities do not give them financial support without expectations of service, or without expectation that they would secure financial support from elsewhere. Because of this situation, Turkish students have to work harder and spend more time to finish their dissertation than I ever had. In addition, my university gave me financial support not only to live decently in Washington, DC (an expensive city), but also gave me money to travel abroad and do research. In short, I did have difficulties while writing my dissertation, but before I discuss them, I want to acknowledge my many privileges.

At the same time, I faced many difficulties while writing my dissertation. One difficulty is that I did my Ph.D. in a foreign country whose language (English) and culture I did not know well. Among many cultural adaptations I had to make, I had to learn English very well, to communicate orally and in writing more effectively to an American and global audience. Another difficulty is I had to learn different languages, including Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish, and Persian to do my research. Many of these languages are difficult to learn in the US because they are not widely available on college campuses. In this regard, Turkish students had an advantage over me because they knew Turkish already and the transition to Ottoman Turkish was easier for them because Ottoman Turkish and modern Turkish are very similar and because Ottoman Turkish is easier to learn in Turkey. The best Ottoman language textbooks today are written in modern Turkish and Ottoman Turkish classes are widely available in Turkey, on college campuses and in cultural foundations. Furthermore, I lived thousands of miles away from the archives most relevant to my research. Lastly, I faced a political challenge. When I was doing my research, the Tigris and Euphrates basin was under the control of ISIS. There were also major political conflicts in the river basin, including the conflict between the Turkish state and its Kurdish minority, the civil war in Syria, and the fragility of the Iraqi state. These conflicts made my access to the Tigris and Euphrates region extremely difficult, if not impossible. I wanted to visit the region often and enjoy it as much as I could, but I couldn't.

Dilara Avci: Oxford University Press has published your book. Could you tell us the publishing process?

Faisal Husain: It is a long process and there is no one process. Every publishing house has a different process. Even every publishing house follows a different process for different books it publishes. So for example, the publishing process for Oxford

University Press is different from the publishing process in Cambridge University Press. Moreover, Oxford University Press follows a different process for different kinds of books it publishes.

In general, the process of Oxford started with my submission of my manuscript. Then, my editor at Oxford sent my manuscript to external reviewers to evaluate my manuscript and render a judgement about it (whether my manuscript is worthy of publication or not). From there, the manuscript moved through different departments at Oxford University Press, such as editing, copyrights, and marketing. It was a nerve-racking process because each step could take a long time, depending on how active the reviewers and the editor were. Luckily, for my book, the process could not be smoother. I was lucky because my editor at Oxford University Press was extremely helpful, kind, and supportive of my work.

Dilara Avcı: Recently, Timaş Publishing has published your book in Turkish. What do you think? Are you excited?

Faisal Husain: It was one of the best things that happened to me in my life. My book was originally published in English and only a few people read it, only academics. People outside the university did not care. This is normal for most academic books published by a university press in the US. In short, the impact of my book in English was extremely limited.

I was so lucky about Timaş because Timaş has a good name in Turkey, and it is a trade publisher. It publishes books for the public, not academics only. Therefore, Timaş did a lot of work to promote the book in Turkey. Timaş's incredible team, such as Zeynep Berktaş, Mehmet Çapkan, Elif Sabah Erkul, and Bilal Keskin, did everything they could to produce and promote the public widely. They made public interested in it. Thanks to Timaş's hard work and wonderful team, I ended up talking to journalists.

Dilara Avcı: Who are the names of the environmental historians you could follow both in the world and in Turkey?

Faisal Husain: I most mostly interested in the work being done by young scholars in the field who recently completed their PhD or about to complete their PhD. For example, I am keenly interested in reading your (Dilara Avcı's) dissertation about the environmental history of the Maritsa River. Other scholars whose work I am following, most of whom are based in Turkey include: Can Gümüş, Zeynep Akçakaya, Deniz Armağan Akto, Mehmet Kentel, Mehmet Kuru, and Semih Çelik. Internationally, I particularly like the work of Alan Mikhail, John McNeill, Michael Christopher Low, and James Scott.

Dilara Avcı: What are your favorite natural location in İstanbul?

Faisal Husain: There are many natural places in İstanbul I love to visit. As far as I remember, these include: Fethi Paşa Korusu in Üsküdar, the Süleymaniye Mosque (with its lovely view of the Bosphorus), the coast of Suadiye, the hill of Çamlıca, and the campus of Boğaziçi, whose view of the Bosphorus is stunning.

Dilara Avci: What are the significant components of environmental history?

Faisal Husain: There are several important components for environmental history. One component involves picking a good geography that makes good environmental sense. For example, should an environmental historian study the geography of Anatolia or the Taurus Mountains? Picking the right geography is an important component of a good environmental history. In addition, a significant component of environmental history is picking a meaningful period that also makes an environmental sense. Should the historian focus on the 16th century? The reign of Kanuni Süleyman? On the other hand, the early modern period? Another important component of environmental history is learning some environmental sciences. What environmental sciences we need to know depends on the topic. For example, for agriculture on the Maritsa River, a historian needs to know a little bit about crops and animal husbandry—how they were cultivated and raised, the climate necessary for their growth, and the basic resources necessary for their survival.

Dilara Avci: What do you think about the environmental crisis?

Faisal Husain: I am not an expert on contemporary environmental politics, but I have a personal opinion based on my very limited knowledge of the current situation. What makes the environmental crisis sad for me is that it is worsening social divisions around the world. In particular, the poorest members of society are suffering the most. The rich and powerful who are causing to environmental crisis can still afford to drink clean water, they can afford to live in places where they can breathe clean air, and they can afford to enjoy life as normal. Those who are paying the price of the environmental crisis are the most vulnerable and poorest among us. They are the ones who drink polluted water; they have to breathe polluted air. Only the weak and poor are suffering the most. This is very unjust. I wish I know what to do about the problem. I do not have solutions. I just know that it is deeply wrong, unjust, and causing pain among those most vulnerable among us.