



# Travellers in Ottoman Lands: The Botanical Legacy

*Edited by Ines Aščerić-Todd,  
Sabina Knees, Janet Starkey,  
Paul Starkey*

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he Ottoman Empire's botanical history is an understudied topic in Ottoman studies. A majority of descriptive works focus on Istanbul's species, royal gardens, or very specific topics on scattered regions

throughout a period of more than six centuries. *Travellers in Ottoman Lands: The Botanical Legacy* (2018) fills this gap by offering a variety of subjects on the Ottoman botanical legacy covering present-day Turkey, the Balkans, North Africa, the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. This edited book not only expands the geographical focus but also uses a rich number of sources showcased by travellers.

The collection of articles is the proceedings of a two-day conference held at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) in alliance with the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East, *Cornucopia* and the Turkish Consulate General of Edinburgh in May 2017. RBGE has housed various collections of species from the Ottoman Empire since the early eighteenth century, thus, the choice of the conference host is quite appropriate.

The editors of the book, Ines Aščerić-Todd, Sabina Knees, Janet Starkey, and Paul Starkey are scholars of Middle Eastern Studies. In the book, experts in botanical studies, archaeologists, conservationists, and historians of the Ottoman Empire present their academic research for professionals, enthusiasts, and students of history. Selected illustrations, tables and maps allow the reader to vividly visualise the subject matter. Indices of plant names and authorities along with people and places let the reader locate different types of data contained in this 379-page book. *Travellers in Ottoman Lands* successfully widens the range of research areas in Ottoman studies and shows how a nuanced exploration of travelogues can yield a plethora of materials on the Ottoman botanical history.

The introduction, written by Ines Aščerić-Todd, attempts to provide a short overview of the Ottoman Empire's legacy by focusing on political, religious and cultural aspects. As the author notes, this task is a challenging one. While well-researched, the introduction is inclined towards the author's own thematic and regional research area (religious history in the Balkans). A more focused socio-cultural history relating to the book's own subject matter would better prepare readers for the following chapters. The introduction would

benefit from sub-sections for various aspects covered and a clear line of chronology (although it follows a loose one, practical signals for the reader could be useful). The author labels the present-day Ayasofya Museum as a mosque (p. 7), which is only one of its historical roles. Most accurately, the Ayasofya is a UNESCO World Heritage site, premier museum and popular tourist destination in Istanbul, a role it has served since 1935. Completed as a Byzantine basilica in 537, it was a mosque from Mehmed the Conqueror's conquest of Istanbul in 1453 until 1934. Another concern specifically emerges due to the author's accounting of the empire's "successes and failures" (p. 5, 14). For a short overview to tackle these terms without a sophisticated narration and analysis is rather fruitless.

In its four chapters, *Travellers in Ottoman Lands* intersects research areas and regions. In Chapter 1, "The Ottoman Garden", the detailed case of the Oxford Dilsuznamah shows a good example of the use of a literary work in order to understand the architectural design of an imperial garden in Edirne. Similarly, Evliya Çelebi's famous *Book of Travels (Seyahatnâme)* informs us about Ottoman fruit cultivation. Another article takes a look at Persian pilgrims' perception of imperial Istanbul's gardens, cemeteries, and public parks. The final article of this chapter focuses on less studied features of Ottoman gardens in relation to public space, education and gender. In doing so, it explores the Bakewell Ottoman Garden located in St. Louis, USA. "Botanists-Travellers", Chapter 2, includes six different articles. They explore the legacy of European botanists and travellers such as Frederik Hasselquist, Pehr Forsskål, Adam Freer, Carl Haussknecht, Asuman Baytop and Georges Vincent Aznavour, among others. Chapter 3, "Bulbs and Conifers" again expands the geographical area by examining numerous species. The first article informs us about the bulbs of Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, former Ottoman territories, along with beautiful close-ups of various species. Its second article presents a detailed research on George Maw's drawings of specimens, yet it raises the question as to why this piece was not included in the previous chapter as it thematically fits better within the scope of botanists and travellers. The third article's brilliant research demonstrates the effect of climate change and harmful practices on the decline of conifers in former Ottoman lands. The use of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Old Testament along with paintings, illustrations and drawings offer an interesting perspective on the Lebanese cedar in the last article. Chapter 4 is about

the deep interrelation between art and botany. Visually delightful articles cover topics such as botanical art in Turkey, Ottoman garden culture in miniatures, the colour red in Ottoman flora, fabric and fibre, and finally the love of flowers in beautiful Oya lace creations in present-day Turkey.

*Travellers in Ottoman Lands* is indeed a detailed academic book with a wealth of information. Overall, a wider public would also be interested in learning more about the Ottoman botany with this exceptionally informative collection. It gives an opportunity to those who enjoy the tulip and rose seasons, floral arts and decorations; and who like to learn about the living and preserved species, and their use for culinary, medical and display purposes. Each author's long research period, exchange of ideas during the conference, and scholarly writing definitely make it a joy to navigate between the pages for a stimulating study on the botanical legacy of the Ottoman Empire.