
By the early seventeenth century, Western European interests had shifted away from the Mediterranean and towards the Atlantic Ocean, a transition that has led historians to assume that the Inner Sea had subsequently lost its coherence and interconnectivity. Faruk Tabak, however, takes an ecumenical approach to the Mediterranean after its sixteenth-century heyday, arguing that while the Mediterranean was greatly affected by this Atlantic shift, the financiers and merchants of the sea's leading cities, Genoa and Venice, had maintained a certain unity by orchestrating adaptations to the changing world economy. The “geohistorical approach” in the title indicates Tabak’s focus on how the city-states adapted to these changes and how that in turn transformed the landscape of the Mediterranean region. Tabak succeeds in offering us a valuable study of historical landscape change guided by the interaction of mutually evolving economic and ecological forces.

He argues that the features closely associated with the Mediterranean landscape today, including vines, olive trees, wheat fields, and livestock, came to dominate only by replacing the landscape of the lucrative sixteenth-century economy. While high-value crops like sugar and cotton arrived from the east to dominate the fifteenth and sixteenth-century landscape and were located mostly on the coastal plains, they continued moving west to the islands of the Atlantic and out of the Mediterranean. The combined forces of the Atlantic-oriented economic shift, the increase of climatic variability during the Little Ice Age, and the arrival of American food crops led to the retreat of the population into the mountains and the development of a more plebian agriculture characterized by small-scale production. The return of the population to the coasts occurred only in the nineteenth century, spurred by the combination of new global demands for cotton under the *pax Britannica*, improved drainage technology to limit the threat of malaria, and a less variable climate.

Professor Tabak draws from an impressive array of sources from several languages and disciplines, doing much to integrate Ottoman and Western European scholarship, as well as economic and environmental history. The book is divided into two parts. Part I, “Of Cities of Saints and Rich Trades,” focuses on the rise of Genoa and Venice and the irony of their involvement...
in processes that would contribute to the weakening of Mediterranean hegemony. Genoa oversaw the westward movement of oriental crops, which found greater success outside the Mediterranean basin in the islands of the Atlantic, and Venice encouraged the departure of rural grain production north of the Alps and east of the Elbe, into the realm of Dutch merchants. The loss of the rich trades forced the people of the Mediterranean to multiply their sources of livelihood. The merchant republics helped them do this in part by expanding rural manufacturing and placing a growing share of their commerce in the hands of lesser merchants.

Part II, “Of Malarial Plains and Arboreal Hills,” demonstrates that economic shifts were only part of the transformation of the Mediterranean landscape. Extreme weather variability during the Little Ice Age caused a higher frequency of flooding and drought. Tabak describes the return of the low-lying landscape to the mosquitoes and marshes as people moved to higher ground away from threats of floods and malaria. The spatial reorganization of settlements into higher altitudes resulting from economic and ecological crises of the late sixteenth century encouraged livestock agriculture and the diversification of crops. The propitious arrival of New World tobacco, maize, and beans ensured a secure subsistence, even allowing people to put more of their grain crops on the market. The blending of economic and ecological changes led Tabak to conclude that “the withdrawal of commercial cultivation away from the low-lying, marshy plains, and the re-centering of economic life around hill—and mountainside cultivation and habitation, in most places in the form of dispersed settlements, were what distinguished the seventeenth—and eighteenth-century Mediterranean from its fifteenth—and sixteenth-century predecessor (p. 248).” It was a different landscape, but one that still shared the same rhythms.

The story is a complicated one, and the author at times struggles with placing its multiple layers into a narrative form. While there is enough information in this book to support an entire course on the early modern Mediterranean, its dense and somewhat repetitive construction would probably prove to be a difficult read for undergraduates. A fully-rounded treatment of all societies around the sea would be a Herculean task, so it should not be considered a major shortcoming that the Ottoman east and the Habsburg west receive most of the attention while other areas are frequently left out, particularly Greece, the Balkans, and North Africa. Nonetheless, this book will provide direction for a future generation of Mediterranean scholars.