

Human-Animal Encounters in the Middle East and Central Asia

1. Introduction

The Turkish Studies Department of the University of Vienna and Humboldt Yale History Network co-organised a workshop entitled “Middle Eastern Animals: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Early Modern to Contemporary Times”. This took place on campus at the University of Vienna from 27–28 June, 2019. At this first-ever meeting focusing on different aspects of human-animal relations in the Middle East, a small group of participants discussed the politics, sociology, anthropology, and history of animals, as well as the various roles of animals in human life, webs of power, and social and cultural relations in the region. The idea of producing a thematic issue that considers how and why it is important to centre animals in historical research emerged during the meeting. This thematic issue of *Diyâr* includes two contributions from the workshop that started the ball rolling three years ago. However, the scope, extent, and objectives are more extensive than this.

2. Human-Animal Studies: A New Perspective

Human-animal studies, also known as *human-non-human animal studies* (HAS), deals with the social, cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions of interactions between humans and non-human animals. It is ‘not so much a field in its own right’, as historian and animal studies scholar Mieke Roscher claimed, ‘but rather a multidisciplinary research agenda which, with the help of an interdisciplinary research programme and methodological apparatus, aims to investigate the impact of human actions on the living conditions of non-human beings’.¹ Owing to its interdisciplinary nature, HAS interconnects and overlaps with different disciplines ranging from history, sociology, anthropology, and archaeology to law and literary studies. The themes and topics it includes are as multifaceted and complex as the relations between humans and non-human animals.²

HAS emerged in the 1980s as a reaction and response to an anthropocentric perspective that centers humans in historical as well as contemporary discussions of human-non-human animal relations. It has since developed rapidly as a counterpoint that underscores the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and animals

- 1 Roscher, Mieke. 2022. ‘Human-Animal Studies’. In Kirchhof, Thomas (ed.). *Online Encyclopedia Philosophy of Nature / Online Lexikon Naturphilosophie*. doi: 10.11588/open.2022.1.85574
- 2 Buschka, Sonja; Gutjahr, Julia and Sebastian, Marcel. 2012. „Gesellschaft und Tiere – Grundlagen und Perspektiven der Human-Animal Studies“. *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*. 62.8–9, 20.

with each other and with the inorganic world. The promulgation of the “Animal Turn” by historian Harriet Ritvo in the 2000s has sustained this development and encouraged researchers to move from a human and anthropocentric point of view to a non-human and non-anthropocentric one.³

The three major strands of research on which the HAS is based are literary animal studies, multi-species studies, and historical animal studies. Researchers of literary animal studies (also called cultural literary animal studies) have studied how literature represents the animal and how represented animalities are studied.⁴ Informed by structuralist, post-colonial, and post-modern theories and concepts emanating from sociology, philosophy, literary theory, and critical theory (such as Michel Foucault’s analysis of power structures, Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, and Donna Haraway’s model of companion species), these researchers have interrogated traditional dichotomies such as human and animal, culture and nature, and subject and object. Multi-species ethnographers and anthropologists have drawn attention to the presence of non-human animals and other living organisms, and the interconnectedness between them and humans. In historically minded works, on the other hand, researchers have investigated the interactive and mutual relationships between humans and non-human animals from a historical perspective.

3. Human-Animal Studies in the Middle Eastern and Central Asian Context

The diverse geographical regions of the Middle East and Central Asia support a great variety of animals. Even though the animal geography(ies) of these regions encompasses a rich and diverse fauna, researchers have only recently reflected on animals in their studies. They have proposed rethinking the agency, role, and experience of animals in their interactions with humans in the Middle Eastern and Central Asian context.⁵ In this thematic issue, we aim to add to the emerging literature on human-

- 3 Ritvo, Harriet. 2007. ‘On the Animal Turn’. *Daedalus: Journal of the Academy of Arts and Sciences*. 4. 118–22.
- 4 Borgards, Roland. 2015. ‘Introduction: Cultural and Literary Animal Studies’. *Journal of Literary Theory*. 9.2. 155–60.
- 5 For some recent works that use the critical lens of human-animal studies in the Middle Eastern and Central Asian context, see: Mikhail, Alan (2014). *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press; Ben-Ami, Ido. 2017. ‘Emotions and the Sixteenth Century Ottoman Carnival of Animals’. In Cockram, Sarah and Wells, Andrew (eds.). *Interspecies Interactions: Animals and Humans between the Middle Ages and Modernity*. London: Routledge. 17–33; Gündoğdu, Cihangir. 2018. ‘The State and the Stray Dogs in Late Ottoman Istanbul: From Unruly Subjects to Servile Friends’. *Middle Eastern Studies*. 54.4. 555–74; Gürses, Hande and Howison, İrmak Ertuna (eds.). *Animals, Plants, and Landscapes: An Ecology of Turkish Literature and Film*. New York: Routledge; Fortuny, Kim. 2019. *Animals and the Environment in Turkish Culture. Ecocriticism and Transnational Literature*. London: IB Tauris; Çelik, Semih. 2019. ‘It’s a Bad Fate to Be Born Near a Forest’: Forest, People and Buffaloes in Mid-Nineteenth Century North-Western Anatolia’. In İnal, Onur and Köse, Yavuz (eds.). *Seeds of Power: Explorations in Ottoman Environmental*

animal studies and provide an avenue for future research that seeks to explore the significant social, cultural, economic, and ecological aspects of human and non-human animal encounters in the Middle East and Central Asia. Our main motive for assembling this thematic issue is to transcend disciplinary, political, and geographical boundaries and link the various approaches and methods that researchers have used to investigate animals and animal-human relations.

This thematic issue brings together seven scholars whose different, but complementary, approaches reflect the revisionist agenda of HAS.

Arlen Wiesenthal, in his contribution, analyses the relationship between Ottoman sovereignty and animal actors as presented by members of the Ottoman imperial court reporting on Sultan Mehmed IV's (r. 1648–1687) hunting expeditions. Based on the descriptions, he argues that its authors 'present Mehmed IV's interactions with animals as an indication of his quality as ruler'.

Donna Landry leads us into the world of British and Ottoman horse breeding between 1650 and 1750 and the role played by Ottoman imports. Through an intensive reading of contemporary European and Ottoman sources (especially Evliya Çelebi), she shows that the Ottomans were "equine multiculturalist" and that the formative influence of the Ottoman "Turkoman" genotype in British horse breeding has been erased from history, so that it 'constitutes an instance of collective, rather than individual, equine agency'.

Semih Çelik takes a close look at the vermin-human interaction in rural Anatolia and Mesopotamia (1600–1850), based on a wide range of Ottoman sources from the early modern period. Until the late nineteenth century flies, locusts or rats were, as he notes, 'the biggest troublemakers in rural Anatolia and Mesopotamia'. Up to this point, an anthropocentric perspective prevailed in dealing with the destructive effects of vermin on food production. Çelik suggests a critical animal history perspective and a focus on the spatial aspect of vermin-human interaction.

Mona Bieling, in her article, unearths the British colonial understanding of arid Mediterranean environments by focusing on Palestine during the British Mandate period (1917–1948). Within this context, Bieling investigates 'the goat's role in British environmental orientalism', since the goat (together with nomadic goat-herding) was 'the ultimate symbol for destruction'. She argues that the British perception of the Palestinian landscape was highly influenced by the Ruined Landscape Theory.

History. Cambridgeshire, UK: White Horse Press. 111–33; Ergin, Meliz. 2021. 'Writing and Animal(ity) in Contemporary Turkish Fiction'. In Oppermann, Serpil and Akıllı, Sinan (eds.). *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 191–204; Yazıcıoğlu, Özlem Ögüt and Hamzaçebi, Ezgi. 2021. 'Precarious Lives of Animals and Humans through the Lens of Contemporary Turkish Literature'. In Oppermann, Serpil and Akıllı, Sinan (eds.). *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books. 205–218; Dağyeli, Jeanine Elif. 2020. 'The Fight Against Heaven-Sent Insects: Dealing with Locust Plagues in the Emirate of Bukhara'. *Environment and History*. 26.1. 79–104; İnal, Onur. 2021. 'One-Humped History: The Camel as Historical Actor in the Late Ottoman Empire'. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. 53.1. 57–72.

Jeanine Dağyeli expands on the geographical perspective by taking us to Central Asia. In these predominantly pastoral and agricultural societies, the animal-human relationship plays a central role and the ‘close cohabitation of humans and non-humans is reflected in a complex cosmological order’. Dağyeli presents the different conceptual registers in vernacular texts (so-called “small genres”) and ‘explores how these reverberate in contemporary, global debates on animal rights, sustainability and environmental protection’.

Kate McClellan, drawing on material from ethnographic fieldwork in Amman, examines human-dog relations in Jordan. She argues that “affective politics” related to the management of stray dogs is revealing, as it shows how Jordanians use this issue to reflect upon different aspects of contemporary life and different futures for their country. According to McClellan, it is the competing effects that both ‘create and reflect human-dog-relations’.

Dogs are also at the centre of Hande Gürses’ contribution. However, they are not real and act as protagonists in two novels whose core theme is the Kurdish conflict in Turkey. In both works, this conflict is told from the perspective of the dog. In her article, Gürses explores ‘the implications of the biopolitical reach of the sovereign state and its impact on the definition of citizenship’ and investigates the nation-building process in Turkey, asking: What is the relation between language and belonging? To what language does one belong? What possibilities of resistance does the language of the non-human animal contain in its encounter with the violence of the sovereign power?