

Contribution ID: 97

Type: **not specified**

From the Mine to the Market: A History of Silver in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire

Friday 19 September 2025 09:35 (20 minutes)

At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire undertook a concerted effort to revive its domestic mining industry, which involved reopening closed mines and excavating in new sites. As part of this state-led initiative, the Keban and Ergani mines were opened in the 1720s. Located in the Upper Euphrates and Tigris River Valley, in present-day Elazığ, they became key suppliers of silver and gold for the imperial treasury and mint, while also providing copper and lead essential for the military. This presentation follows silver's journey from extraction to refinement, transportation to Istanbul, and its eventual minting into coinage. By examining the interplay of human and non-human labor, technology, and state control in this process, I highlight how Ottoman mining policies reshaped the empire's monetary and military infrastructure. Additionally, I explain the scientific knowledge, technical expertise, and resource networks necessary to extract and refine this precious metal. By centering this historical narrative on the journey of silver, I also aim to provide a new materialist approach to Ottoman historiography wherein the matter and its transformations have an agentive role in how history is shaped.

Keywords

Mining, money, state-building, labor, early modern industry

E-mail

derenertas@fas.harvard.edu

Affiliation

Harvard University

Position

Short Biography

Deren Ertaş is a historian and painter currently living in Istanbul. She is a PhD candidate in the joint History and Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. She is currently writing her dissertation entitled, "Subterranean Empire: The Political Economy and Ecology of Mining in the Ottoman Empire." It focuses on the social, economic, and environmental history of the silver, copper, and lead mines of Gümüşhane, Keban, and Ergani in the long eighteenth century. Her research has been generously supported by Fulbright-Hays, the Council of Overseas Research Centers, the American Research Institute in Turkey, Koç University's ANAMED fellowship, and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard, among others. She is a convener of the

MINESCAPES working group at the Consortium for the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine. Before starting her PhD, Deren received her MA from the New School for Social Studies and her BA from Wesleyan University. She grew up in Long Island, New York, after her family relocated to the US from Istanbul in 2005. Besides writing her dissertation, Deren is working on a painting portfolio. She enjoys cooking, traveling, and learning new languages.

Primary author: Deren Ertas (Harvard University)

Presenter: Deren Ertas (Harvard University)

Session Classification: S.4.3. Embodied Knowledge: Applied Sciences and Material Practices in Ottoman and Arabic Traditions

Track Classification: Individual papers