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Book Review

Alan Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Environmental History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 336 pp., $45.00 (pbk), ISBN: 978-0-226-42717-1.

In his recent book titled *Under Osman's Tree*, Alan Mikhail, the author and editor of several groundbreaking works in the field of Ottoman environmental history, treats distinct themes of climate, energy, and disease in an epic way. Named after the tree symbol in the foundation myth of the Ottoman Empire, the book analyzes human and nonhuman dynamics in early modern Egypt with special attention to the complex earth systems of that period, and evaluates the political, economic, and socio-cultural consequences. The author insists that the Ottoman Empire, as with any imperial entity, cannot be fully understood unless political sovereignty and natural resource management are linked. So, he attempts to associate the peoples with their wider environments including animals, epidemics, and climate events. In each part, he tackles a classical reading of Ottoman history with an environmental perspective and incorporates new environmental themes into his reading of imperial processes.

The introductory chapter explains 'why' and 'how' the book was written. According to the author, there used to be a gap in global environmental history when considering the Middle East. However, the Middle East has always been part of the Earth's historical journey, and as such deserves a close investigation. The book links the changes and continuities in Egypt's history with other parts of the Empire, and even with distant lands such as Iceland. Thus, environmental history becomes the methodology to show the interconnectedness of the political, ecological, economic, or socio-cultural systems with any administrative system. Since the analysis is based on the transformation of Ottoman Egypt from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Nile is the main actor, but not the only one. In the remaining chapters, the author examines court reports and memories to document the centrality of the Nile to Egypt, and of Egypt to the Ottoman Empire, as well as the centrality of the early modern Middle East to global environmental understandings.

Part One is titled 'water', and deals with the use of the Nile. In three chapters the author gives important insights about the management of local irrigation issues. Since Egypt was the main source of agriculture for the Empire, irrigation was considered one of the top security concerns by the sovereign. It is especially important to mention the high value of local knowledge in the eyes of the imperial administration. These three chapters demonstrate that

peasants were the key actors for water management in the early modern period; projects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were smaller in scale compared to the huge projects of later eras. Regions like *Fayyum* (a geological depression and oasis) were crucial for the administration as the food suppliers for the whole Empire, including pilgrims visiting holy places every year.

Part Two, named 'work', discusses the transformation of the relationship between labor and the environment. Contrary to the early modern period in rural Egypt, 'forced labor, large-scale and deleterious environmental exploitation, extractive economics and population movements' became the defining features of human–nonhuman relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 77). This also marks an important change from 'let's work' to 'you work!' While *al-'auna* (forced labor) defined the relationship between people and their environments in the former, *al-sukhra* (exploitation) replaced this in the latter period. Such an exploitative approach to nature, as an imitation of Western modernization, resulted in enormous human and nonhuman costs. The large-scale projects such as the *Maḥmūdiyyah* Canal indicate the changing state vision of that period and ushered in devastating projects such as the Suez Canal, the first Aswan Dam and the Aswan High Dam. Engineers played a critical role in these developments, enjoying a solid reputation in the Empire.

In Part Three the author focuses on the theme of 'animal' in two chapters. The first chapter investigates the role of animals in the early modern Ottoman economy, and the second shows how humans replaced animals in parallel with changing agricultural economics due to global and local factors such as disease, famine, and drought. While animals once composed an important dimension of property law and were valued according to their labor potential, humans replaced them in the new energy regime as they were much more useful for the new mode of production in huge, centralized lands.

Part Four, examining the close ties between food, plague, and climate, deserves special attention. It is titled 'elemental', which reminds the reader of the powers of nature. In the first chapter, the author associates the forests of Anatolia with the food produced in Egypt. The chapter summarizes the story as 'grain needs ships' and 'ships need wood' (pp. 155-56). It also indicates that the forest regime at that time was governed by public interests, not by private ones. The chapter gives details about the imperial route of wood from 'the forests to Istanbul, Istanbul to Alexandria, and Alexandria to Bulaq' (p. 161). The whole story proves the extent to which an imperial power needs natural resources to support its economic system and how it manages to control economic circulation. It also explains why plague was considered as a natural factor in the socio-economic system at that time. Indeed, the acceptance of plague as an environmental reality might be a part of religious belief in destiny. However, 'the combination of flood in the fall of 1790, plague in the spring of 1791, and drought in the fall of 1791' caused severe harm to human and nonhuman subjects of the Ottoman Empire and its economic system (p. 178). In the last chapter, the author analyzes how the Laki volcanic fissure that was activated in 1783 affected the climate in the rest of the world, including Egypt in 1784, as well as how the destiny of the Middle East was shaped by the spread of sulfur dioxide from Iceland.

To conclude, this book helps readers to comprehend the details about the relationship between the Ottoman administration, its subjects, and various environments in the early modern period from an environmental history perspective. In so doing, it rebels against the classical historical approach to the Middle East, which has excluded the relationships between people and their environments. The book elicits many questions, one of which is very much related to the field of religion and nature. The court reports indicate that the decisions were taken according to Islamic Law in the early modern period, and in the later period of modernization. After documenting such a transformation, however, one wonders whether it could be the same Islamic Law that bound the Ottoman society in both early modern and modern periods? The historical methodology employed here, which does not assume the existence of some pristine nature, and the knowledge that ecology cannot be separated from history, may help answer very important questions about the interaction between religion and nature in the Ottoman Empire.

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