

Alan Mikhail. *Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Environmental History*. Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2017. 336 pages. ISBN: 9780226427171.

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Alan Mikhail is one of the most prolific authors in the burgeoning field of Ottoman environmental history. His contributions include *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* and *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*.<sup>1</sup> He is also the editor of *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, a collection of articles by leading scholars in the fields of global environmental and Middle East histories.<sup>2</sup> His latest book and the subject of this review, *Under Osman's Tree: The Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Environmental History*, is a revised and extended version of his earlier research on Ottoman Egypt and its environmental history.

Although the title is broad, Mikhail's *Under Osman's Tree* mainly covers eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Egypt. The author begins with a historiographical overview and repeats his maxim that one of the gaping holes in the global story of the environment has been the history of the Middle East, and that one of the gaping holes in the study of the Middle East has been the history of its environment. He discusses the possibilities of writing histories of climate, energy, and diseases in these areas; provides examples from current scholarship; and suggests new avenues of research. He then examines water management in Ottoman-ruled Egypt and shows how Egyptian peasants and locals were in constant dialogue with the distant imperial center to make their land more productive.

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1 Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alan Mikhail, *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

2 Alan Mikhail, ed. *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Mikhail asserts that local knowledge and practice helped Ottoman officials manage the Nile's waters effectively. Arguing against Karl A. Wittfogel's "Oriental despotism" thesis, he claims that it was the peasants, not the sultans, shahs, or emperors, who controlled the day-to-day function and maintenance of the large-scale irrigation networks and acquired thereby a certain amount of autonomy and power. This novel approach, which provides an alternative to the dominant center-periphery model, makes *Under Osman's Tree* not only a book of environmental history, but also an administrative and socio-economic study of Egypt in the late Ottoman period.

Each part of the book deals with a particular theme – Water, Work, Animal, and Elemental – an unconventional classification that accords with the author's overarching thesis: The Ottoman Empire was an ecosystem, and analyzing it as such reveals sets of relationships among resources, peoples, ideas, animals, and places in which all of the system's elements are connected to and dependent upon one another. "The ecological approach to empire," says Mikhail, "helps to integrate multiple kinds of actors – many of whom have remained in the empire's historiographical shadows – into the study of Ottoman history" (202). He makes a list of a few of these actors (viz., peasants, water buffalo, silt, fleas, dirt, salt, microbes, trees, volcanoes, and water currents) and points out that nonhuman nature, as a historical actor, affected the history of Ottoman-ruled Egypt in ways just as important as – and often more important than – imperial bureaucrats, Egyptian peasants, wars, sultans, or global commodity prices. Although this approach runs the risk of environmental determinism, Mikhail is careful to find a balance in his narrative.

While analyzing the empire as a micro (local) ecosystem, Mikhail does not neglect to discuss it as an integral part of a macro (global) ecosystem. For example, he notes that the 1783 eruption of volcano in Laki, Iceland, eventually caused people to die of starvation in Egypt (184). The eruption in Laki triggered a climate change for years to come and resulted in drought and famine in the Egyptian countryside, which quickly turned into an economic and political crisis. As a reminder that one needs to understand complex and multidimensional outcomes of natural events and disasters in history, this crisis enabled local elites and power brokers in Egypt to strengthen their positions and gain an advantage over Istanbul.

Building his narrative on this and other parallel perspectives, Mikhail suggests a new understanding and chronology for Ottoman history by asking: "How did an ox in the Egyptian countryside experience the empire?" "What if we periodized imperial history based on the rise and fall of a single canal in the

Egyptian countryside?” (201), and “How did peoples, animals, trees, diseases, soils function together within the contexts of ecology, empire, and geography?” (203). These are legitimate questions, but it is hard (although not impossible) to provide comprehensive answers for them.

Mikhail rightly claims that the Middle East offers a wealth of source material to track environmental change, landscape manipulation, and human-environment interactions over several centuries. To support this point, he aptly scrutinizes court records and other primary sources from the archives of Turkey, Egypt, and the UK. His copious use of archival and secondary sources is reflected in the fact that more than one-third of the book consists of notes and bibliography (209-325).

*Under Osman's Tree* provides new lenses through which one can gain a better and holistic understanding of Egypt in the late Ottoman period. It is a story not only of peasants, rural elites, local officials, and engineers, but also of waters, domesticated animals, muds, and ashes. It is a must-read for students of Ottoman and environmental history.