

Looking at the Centre-Province Relationship via “Sedd” Maintenance Processes: Local Administration and the State Centre in Eighteenth - Century Ottoman Egypt

Sedd Tamiratları Üzerinden Merkez-Taşra İlişkilerini İncelemek: 18. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Mısırında Yerel Yönetim ve Devlet Merkezi

Mücahide Nihal ENGEL¹ 



ABSTRACT

As the archive records of the period show, the imperial government did not hesitate to invest in Egypt, one of its most profitable provinces. Divan-ı Hümayun, Egyptian villagers and local administrators were always in close contact with regard to the management of the environmental factors in favour of production, both to ensure the continuation of commercial activities and to sustain agricultural production. Ottoman archives in Istanbul present a wide range of *deFTER* series and edict records related to Ottoman Egypt in the 18th century, which is known as the century of ‘*ayan*’ in the Ottoman history studies. In these records, the main agenda topics on the management of environmental factors revolve around the repair works of existing walls to protect agricultural areas from sea water, the preservation of irrigation canals, and the protection of cisterns and canals that provide drinking water to the public. The villagers’ expertise on the Nile and the local geography guided the repair processes, while they were financed by the state treasury. In Alexandria and the surrounding villages, the priority of the reaya and local administrators was to show the necessary care within the framework of sustainability by working together so that these walls, called *sedd*, would not collapse and not become in need of repair. However, in the second half of the 18th century, as the local elements did not fulfill their duties, the area to be repaired increased and the state treasury suffered a loss. In 1768, we see that the state centre raised this issue, asking the local elements to carry out their duties as before. However, the state centre’s warning the local elements and desire to rectify the situation coincide with Bulutkapan Ali Bey’s uprising. Nevertheless, the following attempts such as the intervention of Gazi Hasan Pasha in 1786 failed in the long term too. Shedding light on the centre-province relations in the second half of the eighteenth century, this article focuses on the communication of the state with the local elements regarding the preservation of agricultural lands in Alexandria. It also reveals the agricultural production environment of Alexandria with archival documents.

Keywords: Alexandria, Centre-Province Relations, Ottoman Egypt, Environmental History, 18th Century Ottoman History

¹Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:

Mücahide Nihal ENGEL (Dr. Lecturer),

Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of History, Ankara, Turkey

E-mail: mnengel@ybu.edu.tr

ORCID: 0000-0002-8099-840X

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ÖZ

Arşiv kayıtlarından takip ettiğimiz kadarıyla Divan-ı Hümayun, imparatorluğun en fazla gelir getiren eyaletlerinden birisi olan Mısır'a yatırım yapmaktan çekinmemiştir. Hem ticari faaliyetlerin devamının sağlanması hem de tarımsal üretimin durmaması için çevresel faktörlerin üretim lehine yönetilmesi konusunda İstanbul ile Mısır köylüsü ve yerel yöneticiler daima yakın irtibatla olmuşlardır. Osmanlı Arşivleri literatüre Osmanlı tarihi araştırmaları açısından ayanlar yüzyılı olarak geçen 18. yüzyılda Osmanlı Mısır'ıyla alakalı hayli geniş bir yelpazede defter ve belge kaydı sunmaktadır. Bu kayıtlarda çevresel faktörlerin yönetimi konusunda ana gündem maddeleri, tarım alanlarının deniz suyu gibi çevresel etkenlerden korunması için var olan duvarların tamirata, sulama kanallarının muhafazası ve halkın içme suyunu sağlayan sarnıç ve kanalların korunması konuları etrafında dönmektedir. Masraflarının devlet hazinesinden karşılandığı tamirat süreçlerini köylülerin Nil nehrine ve yerel coğrafyaya hâkim olan uzmanlığı yönlendiriyordu. İskenderiye ve civar köylerde reayanın ve yerel yöneticilerin önceliğini bu sed adı verilen duvarların yıkılmaması ve tamire muhtaç hale gelmemesi için imece usulüyle sürdürülebilirlik çerçevesinde gereken özenin göstermeleri oluşturuyordu. Ancak 18. yüzyılın ikinci yarısı itibarıyla yerel unsurların bu görevlerini yerine getirmedikleri için tamir edilmesi gereken alan arttığı gibi devlet hazinesi de zarar etmişti. 1768'de devlet merkezinin bu konuyu yerel unsurların görevlerini yerine getirmedikleri kaygısıyla dile getirdiğini görüyoruz.

Devlet merkezinin yerel unsurları uyarması ve durumu düzeltme isteği aynı yıl gerçekleşen Bulutkapan Ali Bey isyanı ile aynı zamana denk gelmektedir. 1786 Gazi Hasan Paşa müdahalesi gibi bu konuda daha sonra da yapılan diğer girişimler uzun vadede sonuçsuz kalmıştır. Bu makale devletin bir tarımsal üretim merkezi olan İskenderiye'deki tarım alanlarının muhafazası hususunda yerel unsurlarla olan iletişim şeklini odak noktasına koyarak 18. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında ayan devlet ilişkilerine ışık tutarken İskenderiye'nin tarımsal üretim çevresini de arşiv belgeleri ile gözler önüne sermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: İskenderiye, Merkez-Taşra İlişkileri, Osmanlı Mısır, Çevre Tarihi

Introduction

Edict records in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul enclose numerous registers on the repairs of walls and water canals in Alexandria, the most active port town of Ottoman Egypt in the eighteenth century and a major agricultural production centre. The imperial administration sponsored the maintenance and repairs of these *sedds* (walls) along the Mediterranean, which had been built in the distant past for the protection of agricultural areas. The expenses for these large and long-lasting repair projects were customarily compensated from the government's tax share, the *irsaliye-i hazine*, the annual levy of Egypt.¹ Devoting a large amount of financial, human, and material sources for the repairs, the imperial administration made significant investments in the region and guaranteed the continuity of the tax revenue via agricultural production and commerce. Alongside a regular tax revenue, keeping the agricultural production in good shape was also important for keeping the economic and social order. Therefore, the central government always paid attention to the maintenance of the walls that protected Alexandria's agricultural lands from the salty sea water, and the dams and canals that facilitated irrigation. The *Mühimme-i Mısır defter series* in the Ottoman Archives presents a wide range of information about the repair processes. Although numerous firman records show that the state did not hesitate to expend on the region throughout the century, one edict issued in January 1768 and sent to the *kadı* of Egypt displays obvious discontent with the recent unusual increases in maintenance expenses, and strongly warns the local *multezims* (administrators) with a kind of ultimatum:

*'When the records of the imperial treasury were investigated in depth, since the year of (1)113/[1701] it was seen that the time period between each repair and reinforcement was more than 10 years, and construction costs were no more than either 40 or 50-60 purse akçe. But recently right after the repairs of (11)60/[1747-48], the appointment of a new construction officer (bina emini) is required before the previous one returned, ... and construction costs are not less than 150 purse akçe. Since the annual levy cannot contain the pricey costs of the aforementioned sedds (walls) any more, it is a fact that it is imperative that this awkward situation is required to be reduced to a form of order ...'?*²

While there was previously no hesitation in bearing the costs of any repair, in the second part of the eighteenth century, right before the Russian war and the uprising of Bulutkapan Ali Bey (al-Kabir) we encounter a reproach from the central government regarding the increase in requests for repairs. The decree record, actually, explains the reason for the need for more

1 İdris Bostan, ed., "Doğu Akdeniz'de Bir Osmanlı Deniz Üssü ve Limanı: 18. Yüzyılda Mısır İskenderiyesi" in *Osmanlı Deniz Ticaretii* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2019); Mücahide Güneş, *XVIII. Yüzyılda İskenderiye Limanı* (Master's dissertation, Istanbul University, 2009); Mücahide Nihal Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid eighteenth century- Local Interest Groups and Their Connection with and Rebellions against the Sublime Porte and Resistance to State Authority* (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2017), chapter III.

2 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA hereafter), Mühimme-i Mısır Defter series (MMD hereafter), vol. 8, nr. 544.

frequent repairs as being due to the *mutasarrıfs* and villagers not protecting the walls according to the agreed-upon customs and regulations. This study aims to investigate Ottoman centre-periphery relations through the maintenance and repairs of dikes in Alexandria and demonstrate the changing social, economic, and political relations in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Recent research has explored the investments the Ottoman central government made in the agricultural stability and progress of the province of Egypt via irrigation through the lenses of provincial actors.³ This research demonstrates that local expertise led the maintenance and repair processes. I aim to contribute to this literature by placing the maintenance of dams and dikes along the Mediterranean Sea in a broader political context. As opposed to the centre-periphery theory, current research shows that the central government invested large sums of money in Egypt, which in turn benefited both local communities and the state centre. Surely, the imperial government's care in the region was motivated by a range of incentives. First, these places provided grain for imperial subjects all around the empire: especially to feed the *reaya* in the Haremeyn⁴, and state bureaucrats in different provinces, and the palace kitchen in Istanbul, not to mention European markets.⁵ Additionally, and more importantly, this annual agricultural abundance along the Mediterranean shore and the Nile basin supported the state's need for cash via tax-farming. A failure in the production process would cause a lack of grain in other parts of the empire and resonate as an administrative problem in Istanbul. Furthermore, the problem would grow exponentially since it was crucial for the Porte to make grain available in moderate prices in Istanbul and other cities of the empire. Also, sending grain annually to the Haremeyn was a central priority for the government, whose legitimacy partially rested on being the servant of the two holy cities, *Hadimü'l-Haremeyn*.⁶ Thus, understanding these maintenance projects is vital to the political, social and economic history of Egypt.

A reciprocal cycle in the maintenance of the walls was crucial for three parties: villagers, the local administrators known as *ümera-i musriyye*, and the state centre. In order to sustain agriculture, the walls and canals had to be maintained. The villagers depended on agriculture for their living. The local administration, in our case mostly related to mamluk households, were called *mutasarrıf* as they managed the taxation of the villages via the *iltizam* system. These administrators gathered considerable income as taxfarmers from the agricultural production, and then paid taxes to the central government, which was the last chain of the cycle. A halt in

3 Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in the Ottoman Egypt: An environmental history* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alan Mikhail, "An irrigated empire: The view from Ottoman Fayyum", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010); Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*.

4 Suraiya Faroqhi elucidated how regular flow of grain played an important role for maintaining political peace and safety in Hijaz. See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans: The Hajj under the Ottomans* (I.B. Tauris, 1994)

5 France was a prominent buyer of grain from Egypt. Peter Gran suggests that mamluk beys' command in grain trade and their manipulations on the market had a huge effect on the French expedition's focus on eliminating mamluk beys. See Peter Gran, *Islamic Roots of Capitalism: Egypt 1760-1840* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979)

6 For the relationship between the Ottoman sultan's authority and protecting the holy places, see Faroqhi, *Pilgrims and Sultans*.

agricultural production from damage to the walls could break this cycle. In order to prevent this, we can see that an established regulation was pursued. First, the villagers were organised by the local rulers and carried out maintenance duties in order to prevent large-scale damage. Second, when needed, the state organised and funded repairing processes by using empire-wide sources with the process being initiated by peasants sending a petition, or *mahzar*.⁷

According to what we learn from the decree record, as an established practice, the villagers used to regularly organise and undertake '*imece*', a cooperative work process for the maintenance of the walls by carrying stone, soil and lime and preventing large-scale damage to the walls over the long term. The sultanic decree links the growing number of repair and maintenance requests from the local administration to the failure to carry out this duty. The decree demands the governor to put these regulations in order again and protect state property, '*mal-ı miri*'.⁸ The imperial administration emphasises in the decree that this cycle was broken due to the *mutasarrıfs* and villagers' failure to carry out their duty. Therefore, Divan-ı Hümayun charges the governor of Egypt with the responsibility to arrange the workforce and organise the process, and the '*ocaklı*' and '*mutasarrıf*' with meeting the expenses.⁹ By not performing their duties and instead demanding aid from Istanbul, Divan-ı Hümayun accuses the *mutasarrıfs* for spoiling the state treasury, or the sultan's personal treasury, '*ceyb-i hümayun*'. The sultanic decree, in the meantime, underlines the fact that the local *mutasarrıfs* earn a large income, thousands of purses of silver coins, from the agriculture in the region, and stresses that it was their duty to provide maintenance for the region's walls as the first line of defense. According to Raymond's estimate, the income from Egypt's agricultural production was 411 million *paras* in the end of the eighteenth century. While 80 million *paras* were entitled as the tax to Istanbul, the local *mutasarrıfs* enjoyed 287 million *paras*.¹⁰

Thus, the decree record explicitly states that it was the responsibility of local *mutasarrıfs* and villagers to maintain the dikes in order to prevent large-scale damage. At this point, a couple of questions arise: were the local administrators called *kâşif* normally in charge of organising locals for the maintenance works in the care and protection of walls?¹¹ If they ignored and stopped carrying out this duty, what were the reasons? More importantly, can we relate this

7 Baldwin's seminal work perfectly explains and illustrates petitioning as a means that links a *reaya* in Ottoman Egypt to Divan-ı Hümayun in Istanbul. James Baldwin, *Islamic Law and Empire in Ottoman Cairo* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017, 2018)

8 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 471.

9 *Ocaklı* refers to a member of military regiments in Cairo, who were very active in the local administration of Egypt in the eighteenth century. On the other hand, *mutasarrıf* is an *iltizam* holder. For the land administration and military organisation see, Stanford Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization and Development of Ottoman Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1962).

10 Andre Raymond, *Cairo*, translated by Willard Wood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 31.

11 For detail about *kâşif* and *küşufiyye* see Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization*, 40-1. We know that *kâşif*, subprovincial district leader, was assigned to take care of irrigation features of his territory. See Alan Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree The Ottoman Empire, Egypt & Environmental History* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2017)

change in local administrative duties as being caused by the mamluk household politics of Egypt in the eighteenth century?

As Hathaway's seminal work elaborated, mamluk households rose to the power at the end of the seventeenth century and started to take over important administrative posts in the province. The recent research on Egypt demonstrates that the eighteenth century was a scene of struggle between members of mamluk households for authority and power in Egypt.¹² This included struggling to seize important posts, such as treasury and commanders of hajj caravan. So much so that they created a new post called *seyhülbeled*, and changed the political balance of the province in favour of mamluk households. Though it is not possible to define the local elites as a monolithic and unchanging exclusive bloc, we can say that certain groups gained more financial income. The households successfully held power and wealth, which they used for their benefit, and the intense struggle between them most probably affected Egyptian people in a negative manner. At this point, I ask whether the local elites' struggles prevented the Egyptians from carrying out maintenance works. Or, to put it differently, did those struggles somehow led to ignoring the organisation of the villagers for *imece* works? If so, was it related to the struggles between each other or was it a part of their stance against the state centre?¹³ It is not always possible to answer these questions depending on the primary sources available. But still, looking at the maintenance processes tells a great deal about the political and economic history of Egypt. Above all, the reproach of the Divan-ı Hümayun to *mutasarrıfs/mültezims* ' about not continuing the established regulation of 'imece' can be seen as a sign of transformation in the political practicalities of the second part of the eighteenth century in Egypt. This period is specifically important in the history of Ottoman Egypt, as the second half of the century is somewhat chaotic, starting with Bulutkapan Ali Bey's (al-Kabir) uprising against the state (1768-1772), followed by Gazi Hasan Paşa's intervention in Murad and Ibrahim Beys' administration in 1786, and finally, the French expedition in 1798.

Although the political unrest started in the second half of the century, the maintenance and repair projects continued until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were supervised and funded by Istanbul. Neither the changing power balance between the governor and mamluk beys, nor the struggle for power among mamluk beys affected the maintenance process in a

12 Jane Hathaway, *The Politics of households in Ottoman Egypt The Rise of Qazdağlıs* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1997); Mary Ann Fay, *Unveiling the Harem: Elite Women and the Paradox of Seclusion in Eighteenth-Century Cairo* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Andre Raymond, *Yeniçerilerin Kahiresi: Abdurrahman Kethüda Zamanında bir Osmanlı Kentinin Yükselişi*, trans. Alp Tümertekin (Istanbul: YKY, 1999).

13 We know that due to the struggles between Egypt's local elites, the agricultural production was decreased or caused unrest in the countryside in the late eighteenth century. Referring to al-Jabarti, Cuno mentions security break down in the rural areas due to the struggles between *ümera*, which contributed to decreasing agricultural production with other factors such as inadequate flooding of the Nile or livestock loss as a result of epizoonotic diseases. However, he also mentions that even though the flood of 1793 was again low, adequate amount of lands were irrigated thanks to repair of dikes and canals. Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants Land Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740-1858* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 30-1.

negative manner in the eighteenth century, except for the four years of Ali Bey's uprising and the three years of the French expedition. However, we can see that following both incidents, the government compensated the effects of the turmoils immediately.¹⁴

If we go back to the beginning and try to interpret the aforementioned decree, we can see that the central government's discontent about the increasing expenses concurs with the provincial politics. I aim to examine how the maintenance processes affected the economic and social life of Egyptians, and how it reverberated in the imperial capital. Egypt's local administrators carried out their politics throughout the environmental elements of the province. The walls of Alexandria and the peasants that relied on them to make a living had an influence on the political relations between province and state centre. On this point, how can we read the local's changing approach and neglecting of their maintenance duties? Was this a form of opposition or even disobedience?

Twentieth-century historiography on Ottoman Egypt depicts an autonomous province under the administration of mamluk beys.¹⁵ However, the remonstrance of the centre shown in the decree record we elucidated suggests the opposite. Also, numerous correspondence including many details about the maintenance processes confirms a close relationship between the centre and the periphery. In addition to financing the projects, the centre supported Egypt's villages with human resources, materials from other parts of the empire, including Istanbul, and also occasionally entrusted other officials such as ship captains and so on for projects. Some decree records are extraordinarily detailed, recording even the types of timber used/sent and the number of nails and shovels.¹⁶ These details prove that the central government was closely scrutinising the province, which challenges the discourse of provincial autonomy.

Although we can learn a lot of details from the decree records, a couple of questions can be posed that archival records do not necessarily answer: Under the political circumstances we touched upon, how were the peasants' life affected? How fast did the political, social, economic, and environmental conditions change? While the primary sources of the study give limited information, there is much we can infer from them.

In the following pages, first, Alexandria's position in imperial production and commercial relations will be elaborated. By providing detailed information about the city's economy via trade and production, I aim to position Alexandria as a manufacture and a business centre in the eyes of the reader, which ultimately justifies why Alexandria was chosen among other Egyptian towns that the centre provided support for repair and maintenance as well.¹⁷

14 For the compensation the imperial government sought after the uprising in 1768-1772 see Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century*, ch. III, and for the repair projects after the French expedition to bandage the damages of war see Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*, 9

15 Daniel Crecelius, *The Roots of Modern Egypt: a study of the regimes of 'Ali Bey al-Kabir and Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab, 1760-1775* (Minneapolis and Chicago: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1981), 6; Michael Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule 1517-1798* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 25; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

16 BOA, Cevdet Nafia, (C.NF hereafter), 2522.

17 As a matter of course, Alexandria was not the sole Egyptian city that attracted imperial attention and investment for such maintenance and repairs. For another example on Fayyum, see Mikhail, "An Irrigated Empire"

Secondly, the historical background of established regulations for the maintenance of agricultural production, namely irrigation, will be explained, and then, the administrative aspects of the topic will be discussed. Specific repair cases will be provided enclosing details on how the processes were performed and organised by local means on the one hand, and funded and followed closely by the central government on the other hand. One of the most important aspects of the subject, as recent historiography suggests, must be how the imperial capital subordinated human and material resources from around the empire for the maintenance processes in Egypt's Alexandria.¹⁸ However, in the changing political environment of the second half of the eighteenth century, the empowered provincial elite affected/changed the established irrigation regulations of Egypt. Another important aspect that this study aims to stress is individuals' interaction with their environment in the context of Egyptians' 'imece' collective work in order to protect their agricultural lands from the salty sea water.

The Unique Status of Alexandria: agriculture and commerce in one city

In this section, Alexandria's position within the larger Ottoman Empire will be elaborated. Alexandria, with its outstanding hinterland for agriculture and commerce, occupied a significant place in the eighteenth century Eastern Mediterranean world. Located in the western part of the Delta, where the Nile flows into the Mediterranean, the surroundings of Alexandria provided fertile lands, especially for rice production.

From the Ottoman conquest onwards until the French Expedition, Egypt had never been a warfront. Thus, its productive Nile basin was never affected negatively by international military conflicts in the same way other Ottoman provinces were. Moreover, it should also be emphasised that Egypt's agricultural lands were blessed with the Nile, a river symbolizing stability since antiquity, as it annually flooded every September without fail and renewed the soil for agriculture. This meant that Egyptian peasants never needed to fallow or change what they planted from year to year. This, therefore, brought permanence both for the Egyptian peasants and the administration. For the imperial administration, this meant a consistent revenue source to support other regions in the empire. Alexandria always provided grain, and thus financial support and stability for Istanbul, Haremeyn and other cities throughout the empire. It also supplied for the imperial kitchen and shipyard in Istanbul.¹⁹ Namely, the dikes, *sedds*, also referred as *bend* in the records, on the shore of the Mediterranean from Alexandria to Damietta made it possible to nourish a vast range of Ottoman reaya in the Ottoman domains, as well as Europeans via grain imports.

The dikes near Alexandria were crucial for agriculture since they protected the fertile soil of the Delta region from the salty seawater flooding onto land. These walls were situated

18 Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*; Mikhail, "An Irrigated Empire"; Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*.

19 See Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*, ch. II

between Alexandria and Reşid (Rosetta) in Buhayra, between Ebu Kır (Abu Qir) and Ma'diya, and Ramla and Ebu Kır. Ottomans used the terminology of *sedd* when referring to these walls. While the word *sedd* means dam in Arabic language, it also means to block, or put a barrier in front of something to prevent it from flowing.²⁰ *Sedds* were open to damage by sea waves and/or activities of villagers and/or misuse of fishermen, and they used to decay over time. The very existence of these *sedds* had an impact on agricultural production, and by extension the social, economic, and political situation, not only of the region, but also the imperial capital. Maybe for this reason, the maintenance of these *sedds* on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean was among the important topics of Divan-ı Hümayun in the imperial capital during the eighteenth century, during both war and peacetime.

In addition to agricultural production, Alexandria held a unique status as a port town for the transportation of goods produced in Egypt as well as the commercial products brought from the Yemen or South Asia, such as coffee and spices. Furthermore, it was a connection point between the imperial capital and the southeast regions of the empire.²¹ The city was a hub for these products to be sent to the cities of the Ottoman Empire and Europe. Thus, its unique position influenced the flow, and thus availability and prices, of agricultural products and other commercial goods.²² The Delta was not only agriculturally a productive place, creating the food supply for the Haremeyn and Istanbul, but was also a trade centre and crossroads for international and domestic trade thanks to the port of Alexandria, which was one of the biggest ports in terms of trade volume, both in trade between the Ottoman Empire and Europe as well as between domestic ports of the empire.²³ Coffee from Yemen, spices from India, and grain and sugarcane from Egypt were distributed to the Ottoman world and Europe from this Mediterranean port. Although three fourths of the commercial activities occurred in the domestic Ottoman realm, Alexandria was inhabited by European traders, with consuls representing them in the diplomatic arena, which made Alexandria into a cosmopolitan city. Generating large income, its geostrategic position was also another important point that elevated Egypt as a province and Alexandria as a port. It was crucial for the Ottoman rule in the Mediterranean, the Hijaz, the Red Sea and indirectly for the Indian Ocean trade delivered to the West and Ottoman lands via Egypt.

Sedds situated on the shore secured the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of people. Due to its economic importance, Istanbul always took care of these walls and financially supported their maintenance. The state centre also supported the commercial activities of the region by bearing the cost of repairs of some caravanserais and water dams in the city. We encounter an

20 Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary: The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic. IV ed.* Snowball Publishing, 2019.

21 See Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*, ch. III.

22 See Güneş, *İskenderiye Limanı*, ch. II.

23 Daniel Panzac, "International and Domestic Maritime Trade in the Ottoman Empire during the 18th Century", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 24, No. 2, (May 1992).

example of a room in a caravanserai in Madiye²⁴ being built in the *Mühimme-i Mısır defter* series. In 1738, the room and a kitchen were added to this khan. Ten abandoned cisterns were also restored in this project. The state spent 2 *mısri kese akçe* on these repairs.²⁵

Egypt was the most lucrative province of the empire besides the Balkans. It provided a great deal of foodstuff for the capital and other places in the empire, in addition to the annual surplus which went directly to sultan's personal treasury, *ceyb-i hümayun hazinesi*.²⁶ An interruption in the agricultural and commercial activities in the region would create confusion for many parties in the empire. We can say that economic consequences made the *sedds* near the delta cities, especially Alexandria and Rosetta, a crucial matter for the imperial government. In addition, as an early-modern provisionalist government, the Porte held responsibility for making available the main food supplies for the sultan's subjects, *reaya*, especially in the imperial capital at least in moderate prices, if not cheap.

Another ecological characteristic of Alexandria that we should mention here as it had an impact on the environment and daily life of its dwellers was the lack of fresh water sources. The dams and fountain basins were filled with water when the Nile flooded once a year. Thus, the maintenance of dams and water canals was crucially important and will be addressed in the following pages.

Alexandria was an agricultural production centre as well as being an international commercial hub. Being an important centre in the network of international and domestic commerce, it contributed to the wealth of Egyptian merchants.²⁷ The maintenance of the walls was not only crucial for the continuity of production in Alexandria, but was also crucial to maintain the city as a political and administrative centre as a whole – with the other functions it carried out. For example, the port of Alexandria served as a transfer point for the military and political organisation of the empire. Egyptian soldiers for the Iranian and Russian wars were sent from the Alexandrian port. Cannons, horses and other military supplies from Istanbul to Jeddah were transferred via Alexandria. Moreover, food supplies to the imperial kitchen such as rice, chickpeas, and lentil – either produced in the city or sent from its environs- were shipped from the port. Equipment, such as oakum, twine, and gunpowder, produced in different towns of Egypt were also transported to the imperial shipyard, *Tersane-i Amire*, in Istanbul via the

24 Charles Thompson stayed in this very caravansari in 1767 when he was headed to Alexandria from Reşid. Charles Thompson, *Travels Through Turkey in Asia the Holy Land, Arabia, Egypt and Other Parts* (London: The Bible and Sun, 1767), 254.

25 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 430; BOA, Cevdet Belediye (C.BLD hereafter), 7232. One *mısri kese* equaled 75.000 *akçe*/125.000 *guruş* in the mid-eighteenth century. See Ahmet Tabakoğlu, *Gerileme Dönemine Girerken Osmanlı Maliyesi* (Istanbul, 1985), 61; Serap Yılmaz, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun Doğu ile Ekonomik ilişkileri: XVIII. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında Osmanlı-Hint Ticareti ile İlgili Bir Araştırma Fransız Arşivlerinden I", *Belleten*, vol. 56, nr. 217, 1992.

26 For more information about the economic importance of Egypt, see Andre Raymond, *Artisans et Commerçants, au Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1973-1974); Engel, *Ottoman Egypt*.

27 For further detail, see Nelly Hanna, *Making big Money in 1600 The Life and Times of Isma'il Abu Taqiyya, Egyptian Merchant* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

Alexandrian port. Since the city also had a shipyard, it trained specialists and experts in the field, and this work force, from time to time, supported the imperial shipyard. Thus, although the walls were built for agriculture, they functioned to maintain Alexandria, a crucial port town of the Ottoman Empire in the North Africa as a whole. Therefore, the imperial administration supported their maintenance.

The restoration of the dikes near Alexandria must have been more a complex task when compared to any other places within the empire, as Egypt's natural environment did not help much in providing raw material for the repair processes.²⁸ Nevertheless, the repair process shows us that the imperial administration successfully organised natural resources from around the empire and employed them in the restorations in Alexandria effectively.

The correspondence between the local and central administration builds our first-hand knowledge regarding the importance of the city in terms of trade and agriculture, and also gives us the opportunity to understand the relationship between the local and the central governments in an age of decentralized administration. Reading between the lines gives us strong hints about the nature of the relationship between Egypt's inhabitants and the central government in Istanbul. The wording and discourse used in the decrees for Alexandria and its environs hints how the central government saw and positioned these lands: *serhadd-i azim*, grand borderlands²⁹ and *atyab-ı mal-ı padişahi*, the best property of the sultan.³⁰ The Alexandria and Reşid gorges were considered as the key of Cairo by the imperial centre.³¹ Therefore, the government always issued decrees for taking measures aimed at preserving and protecting the dikes from damage.

Explaining the position of the region in the wider context of the imperial economic and political milieu, I build upon the existing literature and contend that the struggles both between the local elites internally and with the Ottoman governor did not have a considerable negative influence on the centre's involvement and funding of repairs, at least not until the last decade of the eighteenth century. Additionally, as the archival evidence suggests, we can clearly see that there was a change in the province in the way local *mutasarrıfs* and villagers managed things in Alexandria. This was likely due to the change in the mamluk beys' behaviour after they stopped doing things the way they used to do. While the decree above is not a common one, it also is not the only one in which the central government claimed that the locals were not carrying out their duties as they used to.

From a wide perspective, the maintenance and repair process of the walls alongside the agricultural lands in Alexandria as far as Ebu Kır and Reşid is a good example of the eighteenth-century state-province relationship established in the political milieu of the Ottoman Empire: a flexible and pragmatic administrative style that gives the local administration initiative

28 Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 170.

29 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 2.

30 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 544

31 MMD, vol. 10, nr. 236.

to handle issues in the best possible manner. In truth, this approach was embraced by the imperial administration long before the eighteenth century. From the very beginning after Egypt's conquest, the Ottomans relied on the local practices rather than setting an imperial regulation for Egypt's irrigation system. Nor was this a method first pursued by the Ottomans. Rather, this was a practice inherited from the Mamluk Sultanate, which in turn had taken it from the Ayyubids.³² After the Ottoman conquest, the imperial government established the legal administration of the province by regulating the provincial administrative items in a set of code of laws, and included Egypt in the Ottoman management. However, these regulations were not an implementation of an imperial code of conducts. Rather, the empire depended on practices ongoing from the past, applied by administrators of the Mamluk Sultanate and even the Ayyubids. The rural and civic life of Egypt were regulated by the *Kanunname* of Egypt. In addition to this canonic legal document, *al-Jusur al-Sultaniye* is another important code.³³ Prepared in 1539-40, *al-Jusur al-Sultaniyye* was the basic code of law for the use of water sources by the local administration in Egypt. The main aim of the document was to establish a cooperative organisation for an effective, sustainable and equitable approach for the rural communities in the province.

Also, the regulations helped to determine the outcomes of legal disputes over water in the countryside and shaped peasants' interaction with one another and with the imperial bureaucracy. Alan Mikhail asserts that the first and main aim of this project was to 'map and delineate the many communities and, perhaps more important, show who was responsible for maintaining irrigation works.' The significant rule was that 'who shared water also shared responsibility for maintaining the irrigation works carrying the water.'³⁴ The ultimate goal for this kind of project/code of law was to guarantee the regularity of the irrigation and to maintain the fertility, and thus, production of agriculture.³⁵

Hence, the responsibilities of the villagers were determined by the elements of the law from the onset. The Egyptian peasants were the main party that knew the region and how the environmental agents worked. As such, during the maintenance and repair works, their expertise led the processes. On the other hand, depending on the Egyptian peasants' knowledge, labour, and expertise, the imperial administration advised them on how to manage and fund the projects. The locals instead relied on the financial sources and administration of the centre.³⁶

Although the Ottoman central administration left such issues to be handled by the locals, it is important to underline that they were involved in every stage of the restoration processes. They often provided support in resources: mostly timber and other construction materials as

32 Nicolas Michel, *L'Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle* (Peeters, 2018).

33 Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree*, 20.

34 Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree*, 20-21.

35 Mikhail argues that 'a report like *al-Jusur al-Sultaniyye* was also a tool for the state to show its influence in the periphery and sustain its rule.' Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree*, 21.

36 Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree*, 19.

well as occasionally experts that were sent by Istanbul. An official called *mübaşir* or *bina emini* was assigned from Istanbul to supervise the financial process. We should mention that the Ottoman Empire's administration did have the drawback of being far away from the region, which made the process occasionally complex. However, we can see that the organisational skills of the imperial government were always at work.

Mikhail's *Nature and Empire* showed that the Ottoman central administration maintained a consistent sustenance in Egypt on the one hand by employing empire-wide sources, and on the other hand relying on local expertise and work force. This strongly contrasts with Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Paşa era's compulsory and province-wide construction where he only relied on provincial sources and forced villagers to leave their towns and work in other cities. Kavalalı Mehmed Ali's approach affected the environment of the province in a negative manner by usurping the limited natural sources. Thus, although Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Paşa's projects were ambitious and reinforced the production areas, their effects were limited and harmed the environmental and human resources, and were consequently not as sustainable.³⁷

In light of this information, how should we interpret the central administration's reproach about the locals ignoring their duties? I contend that the imperial capital aimed to keep the *status quo*, intending to keep both a sustainable environment for the locals, and keep the local administrative instruments under control. This also emphasises the centre's opposition to change. As recent historiography establishes, the economic practices of the empire were based on three aspects, one of which was maintaining the tradition.³⁸ In their correspondence, the centre frequently asked the officers/administrators to carry out their duties based on '*adet-i kadim üzere*' (based on the old practices). An important aspect of the imperial administration is the tendency to continue tasks in the traditional manner. To elaborate, the following pages will give information about the local administration's political stance and later present detailed repair cases.

Political background

The eighteenth century is marked as the age of decentralization and rise of ayans in the Ottoman historiography, with Egypt not being exception to this trend. Mamluk beys kept control of all the important posts of the province, such as subprovincial administrations, customs, and treasury, via the households they built³⁹ in addition to forming a brand-new

37 Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, pp. 194-200. For the indications of differences between the early-modern and the modern era's administrative approaches and its consequences, chapter IV provides an insight on the early modern and modern era construction projects during the eighteenth century, and early nineteenth century's mandatory public construction projects. The locality of labour is the main point in the early modern era projects, which provided a humane and equal environment for the locals.

38 Mehmet Genç, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Devlet ve Ekonomi* (Istanbul, 2000).

39 Hathaway, *The Politics of Households*.

post, the *şeyhülbeled*,⁴⁰ against the Ottoman governor in the second half of the eighteenth century. Also, the short tenure of the Ottoman governor must have a significant effect on provincial politics and the rise of mamluks.⁴¹ Many twentieth century historians introduced these local actors of Egypt as autonomous administrators.⁴² However, it is highly likely that these scholars were influenced by the time period in which they lived while forwarding this view.⁴³ The nationalistic perspective of the twentieth century must have had this inclination. Nevertheless, recent historiography depending on both central and provincial archives revealed that local administrators in Egypt did not act autonomously in the eighteenth century except for small intermittent periods, such as Ali Bey al-Kabir's uprising and the French expedition.⁴⁴ Accordingly, serial and detailed correspondence between Istanbul and Cairo available in the Ottoman archives supports this approach.

This study aims to contribute to the historiography via an investigation of the relationship between centre and periphery, namely the mamluk beys and Divan-ı Hümayun, via the repairs of the dikes around a prominent city of commerce and agriculture, Alexandria, in the eighteenth century which marked the rise of local administrative agents, namely the *ayans*. Also, elaborating on the archival documents, it will touch on the environmental history of Alexandria, even if only briefly.

Although the governor appointed by the central government led the provincial affairs in the provincial Divan, the mid-eighteenth century was dominated by the political challenge of the *ümera-i misriyye* against the governor's authority.⁴⁵ As recent historiography elaborated, the Ottoman administration kept the mamluk beys as a balancing element against the authority of the governor and military members.⁴⁶ After the political crisis in 1711, mamluk households thrived in the political arena with the *aghas* of military regiments. The mid-eighteenth century marked the period when the households grew around strong figures such as İbrahim Kethüda (d.1754). *Şeyhülbeled*, the strongest political figure among *sancak beyis*, who controlled rural tax farms,⁴⁷ increased his authority. The local military and administrative elite established good relations with Istanbul, as they had to have the support of the centre against their mamluk rivals in Cairo. In order to maintain a strong presence in Egypt, they lobbied in Istanbul by sending

40 Jane Hathaway, "Osmanlının Çerkez Mehmet Bey'in İsyanına Verdiği Tepki", in Jane Hathaway, ed., *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda İsyan ve Ayaklanma* (Istanbul, 2007).

41 See Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century*, ch IV

42 Crecelius, *The Roots of Modern Egypt*; Winter, *Egyptian Society Under Ottoman Rule*; Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt*.

43 Cem Emrence, *Osmanlı Ortadoğu'sunu Yeniden Düşünmek*, trans. Gül Çağalı Güven (Istanbul: İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2012)

44 Hathaway contends that the local organization in Egypt in the form of households was similar to the imperial one in Istanbul: Hathaway, *The Politics of Households*; for further detail about the provincial politics in the second half of the century, see Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century*.

45 Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century*.

46 Hathaway, *The Politics of Households*, 8.

47 Hathaway, "Mehmed Bey'in İsyanı", 169.

gifts to the sultans and their other allies in the palace. The Ottoman central administration body had to acknowledge these figures' political stance. It even came to the point that Divan-ı Hümayun referred to these powerful *şeyhülbeleds* when referring to the governors, who were appointed by Istanbul and mostly raised in Enderun, in the decree records.⁴⁸ Most of the decrees addressed to the local administration also included the *ümera-i mısriyye* and head officers of seven regiments. They, therefore, became an indispensable part of the provincial administrative hierarchy.

Understanding the process via repair cases

The maintenance of dikes and dams in Alexandria served three main goals: preserving agricultural lands from sea water's damage, providing drinking water for people by clearing silt in water canals and repairing cisterns, and irrigation (or bridge repairs). The repair projects documented in the decree records present the great organisation skill of Divan-ı Hümayun. As aforementioned, the imperial administration attached great importance to maintenance due to Egypt being one of the biggest food suppliers of the empire alongside the Balkans. A problem in the irrigation of an Egyptian village would cause food shortages in the Haremeyn or Istanbul. The correspondence between Istanbul and Cairo shows us that the imperial administration's approach was always towards preventing the damages first and protecting "state-owned property, *mâl-ı mîrî*." The traditional process would start with a petition. Restoration tasks were also done with the cooperation of the public and local government. With the purpose of protecting the income balance of the province of Egypt, labour was conducted meticulously in order to finish without delay.

A typical maintenance process can be traced via records as follows: the need for maintenance would be notified to the imperial capital via a *mahzar*, or petition, by Egyptian peasants. The imperial capital would appoint a *mübaşir*, an officer, to administer the whole repair process.⁴⁹ The decree would dictate to the officer and the governor of Egypt how they should follow the repair process and the sources they use to fund the project. We have little knowledge about the expertise of the *mübaşir*. They were not necessarily technical people but were rather mostly appointed among the *kapıcıbaşıs* of the palace, and served as the heads of maintenance

48 MMD, 8, nr. 544 while counting the repairs undertaken in the eighteenth century, Ibrahim Bey's and Mustafa Bey's rules were referred alongside the governors'.

49 Whether these names were proposed by the officers in Cairo or in Istanbul is uncertain. It is highly likely that these people were not Cairenes. They came to Egypt as only officers with a duty to finish and most probably they back to Istanbul. Some of them however may have returned to Egypt back with other official duties later. For example, a noteworthy name in the early eighteenth century's decrees who was sent as bailiff in the 1700s was Hekimoğlu Ali, who must be the same Hekimzade Ali Paşa who was appointed as the Ottoman governor twice in the 1740s and 1750s.

projects.⁵⁰ Depending on the records in Egypt's provincial archive, Mikhail claims that the whole repair process was carried out by the expertise of locals.⁵¹ The decree records in the Ottoman archives do not suggest anything contradicting Mikhail's argument relating to the position of the *mübaşir*. Nevertheless, the records show us the main procedure the *mübaşir* would follow, but we do not know whether the details were planned by Cairo and sent to Istanbul beforehand or not.

Repair and maintenance expenses would be compensated from Egypt's *irsaliye-i hazine*, which was sent to the imperial capital each year regularly, and sometimes from the *hulvan-ı kura* income (the income obtained from the sale of some villages' income in Egypt).⁵² Both of them were subject to the sultan's personal treasury – *ceyb-i hümayun*. Thus, sultan paid personally for the tranquillity of small villages in a far away province of his empire.

Mostly, the process required other imperial officers' involvement due to the fact that some construction equipment and resources, such as timber, were supplied from other provinces of the empire. The administrator of the province that the timber was brought from, as well as the ship captain that would transfer the timber, the *kaptan-ı derya*, would be other addressees of the sultanic decrees, and they would be told what exact procedure they were to follow during the transfers and delivery of the materials to Alexandria.⁵³

Before the start of this process, the local administration and villagers were asked to make an exploratory trip to the construction site and conduct an estimation for the materials needed and how much the project would cost. They would explore the site, determine the exact field to be repaired, and estimate the total cost. They would determine the needed materials to be used in the repair as well, so that the transfer of any materials not available in Egypt could be planned. The workers were sometimes also arranged and sent from Istanbul. Alongside manpower, equipment and resources such as timber (Aegean Islands, Rumelia and West Anatolia), iron, nails and ammunition were sent from Istanbul or other parts of the empire too. The last two were usually sent from the reserves of the imperial shipyard, but were occasionally bought.⁵⁴ The *mübaşir* alongside the *kadı* of Alexandria, the chief officers of seven military regiments,

50 We do not know exactly the extent of their authority or whether they had any expertise in technical issues. But certainly they were Ottoman bureaucrats who followed all the repair and maintenance progress, reported to the centre and took the financial records of the repairs with them to Istanbul. In addition to *mübaşir*, another title used by Divan is *bina emini*, who might be the equivalent of modern 'contractor'.

51 Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 4.

52 For detail about *hulvan* see Shaw, *The Financial and Administrative Organization*, 313.

53 For example, decrees addressed to Maryolzade Mustafa Paşa from the *ümera-i derya*; to see captain, *derya kaptanı*, Mustafa Paşa.

54 C.NF, 2522.

building engineers and *ehl-i vukuf* and *ehl-i hibre*⁵⁵ were expected to attend the exploration/estimation. Occasionally, some other officials also attended these exploratory trips. For example, in 1710, one edict demanded the *havale ağası*, an imperial officer who was responsible for a transaction in Alexandria, the head customs officer of Alexandria, *bey kethüdası*, the *kale dizdarları*- lords of castles on the shore of the Mediterranean and other experts to attend an exploration trip to the site. In another repair project, the *şeyhülbeled* was also ordered to attend the exploration. After the trip, an official report prepared for the estimation with an *ilam* and *huccet* from the *kadı* would be sent to Istanbul.⁵⁶

The correspondence shows us that the planning of the repair process was similar to the planning of military expeditions. Although the second part of the eighteenth century witnessed a number of political unrests in Egypt, we can clearly see that this type of organisation was still smoothly carried out until 1801. It shows that the relations of the mamluk beys, which turned into a struggle among themselves and with the state on some occasions, were not that simple, but rather complex networks of relations. In the following section, I aim to provide more detail within the framework of a couple of maintenance cases.

Repairs of Sedd-i kebir

The walls, which were made with the purpose of protecting agricultural lands, collapsed over time due to the effect of wind and waves, thus exposing the region's lands to floods.⁵⁷ In order to prevent this, a number of maintenance and repair projects were organised by the local and the central administrations. In the eighteenth century, the Alexandria port,⁵⁸ Alexandria castle,⁵⁹ the Eşrefiye canal that carried drinking water to Alexandria,⁶⁰ and the grand Alexandrian tower⁶¹ located outside of the walls were repaired. In this section, we will start with the repairs of the walls, as they were the structures that required the most frequent repair. The walls had been built in the distant past between Alexandria and Reşid in order to protect fields susceptible to sea water along the Mediterranean coast in various parts between Ebu Kır and Madiye, in Buhayra, and between Remle and Ebu Kır. An expression mentioned in the decree records regarding these walls called them: "...*kadîmü 'l-esâs me 'ser-i celile-i hüsvâneneden olan sūdūd-i*

55 *Ehl-i vukuf* and *ehl-i hibre* were elders and notables among the people of the region, who lived their whole life in that region, knew the area better than anyone. They had their own observations and experiences about the field. The officers who went to the exploratory trips had to consider these people's opinions and ideas. The Ottoman bureaucracy relied on them. Referring to *ehl-i hibre*'s opinion and witnessship was not peculiar to *sedd* repairs. They were assigned for the investigations of other construction projects in the daily life of Egypt too. See Nelly Hanna, *Osmanlı Kahiresinde İnşaat İşleri (1517-1798)*, trans. Yıldray Özbek (Kayseri: Kivilem Yayınları, 2005)

56 MMD, vol. 4, nr. 138.

57 BOA, Hatt-ı Hümayun (HH hereafter), 29/1360.

58 MMD, vol. 1, nr. 485.

59 Es-Seyyid Abdülaziz Salim, *Tarihü'l-İskenderiye ve Hazaratüha fi'l- 'Asri'l-İslamî* (İskenderiye: Müessesetü Şebâbi'l-Câmi'ati lis-Sıbâ'a ve'n-Neşr, 1982).

60 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 393.

61 MMD, vol. 3, nr. 692.

mütenevvia yuhakkimuhullâhu te'âlâ..." The phrase of 'Me'ser-i celile-i hüsvrevane' especially points out that the Porte actually saw these buildings as beautiful antique artifacts, which puts the repair works in the context of restoration as well. However, the main emphasis in the archival records is on the protection of the agricultural areas. This was a result of pragmatic approach of the state. The decree records kept in the imperial archives provide a lot of detail, which ultimately allow us to comprehend and acknowledge the eighteenth century's so-called decentralised administration, and how this administration pragmatically ran the repair processes via local agents, but at the same time sought to give the impression that it was in charge, at least until the 1760s. Moreover, it is crucial to underline the fact that being a part of a large imperial organisation preserved Egypt's environment in terms of both natural and human resources. During the repair processes, the imperial government's channelling of resources from around the empire to Alexandria was crucial in preserving the city's sources and maintaining them. This is in contrast to Mehmed Ali Paşa's ambitious projects, which Mikhail shows actually damaged Egyptians and Egypt's natural sources in the nineteenth century.⁶²

These lands, which provided the largest portion of the Ottoman capitol's needs for rice and sugar, were protected from the salty water of the Mediterranean sea. For this reason, many embankments were installed near the coast. Unfortunately, those embankments could not manage to prevent the soils from floods due to the fact that heavy winds and waves destroyed them over time. Numerous edicts were issued regarding the repairs in the region, mostly including topics of material equipment required around the empire, human resources employed in the repair projects, and last but not the least, the funds for the repairs. These records can tell us much about the imperial organisation. For example, from the beginning of the century, a decree sent in September 1713 from Divan-ı Hümayun to the governor of Egypt stating that the timber needed for the repair of the *sedds* near Alexandria was going to be supplied from the woods in Menteşe mountain in Western Anatolia, and transferred to Alexandria by sea.⁶³ While this decree record shows us how the imperial capital employed the sources from one side of the empire to the other, on the other hand, the choice of source for the wood to be supplied raises the question as to whether the choice was influenced by the famous mamluk household Kazdağlı, which were related to the Western Anatolia Kazdağı.

Recent historiography emphasises how the repair processes were led by Egyptian peasants. However, we have to highlight the imperial organisation and acknowledge how the imperial government closely followed the process as the decrees show that the imperial centre knew and monitored the whole process beyond mere shadowing. More importantly, the centre was involved in the processes via supplying the materials used, workers employed in the construction works, and organising transportation. It also addressed all the parties involved in the repair process separately when needed. Also, the decrees included all partakers that had anything to

62 Mikhail, *Nature and Environment*, 294.

63 MMD, vol. 1, nr. 290.

do with the process, instructing them to conduct the process as ordered. In some incidents, the central government quite remarkably arranged all the process of transportation of workers, materials, and sometimes their food, even before the *mübaşir* arrived in Egypt. In one of the repair works in 1801 (that wall must have been damaged during the French expedition), 100 workers including engineers, were transferred from Istanbul to Alexandria and the bread, *peksimed*, they needed during their voyage was compensated by the central government. The central government was always practical about using its resources, as 60% of the needed amount was demanded from Bulgaroğulları in Gelibolu, and 40% of it was the responsibility of the *peksimedci ağa*. This decree record shows that how the imperial organisation employed citizens in Gelibolu to feed people who would work in construction projects in Egypt.⁶⁴

Numerous decree records of the *Mühimme-i Mısır Defter series* provide information regarding the repair processes undertaken throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ We will look in detail at five different cases from 1710 to 1801. These repairs were carried out in different times for different fragments of the walls between Alexandria and Reşid.

The first case is dated 1122/1710. The petition sent by the Egyptians detailed that the exploration carried out by locals revealed that an 18.000 *zirâ*'/13.644 square metre part of the walls needed repair. They informed the Divan that 40 *misri kese* was to be spent for the repair. 30 *misri kese* were to be compensated from the *irsaliye-i hazine* and the remaining 10 *misri kese* were going to be sent from the centre.⁶⁶ However, following decree records suggest that this repair project was somehow delayed until 1125/1713 and the cost of the new repairs was estimated to be 53 *misri kese* and 8334 *para*.⁶⁷ The *havale ağası*, the customs officer in Alexandria, *bey kethüdası*, lords of castles and other *ehl-i vukuf* conducted an exploratory trip to the demolished area. As a result of this trip, they determined that, since the restoration was delayed, an area of 22.750 *zirâ*'/17.244,5 metres was to be restored, which was only 9750 *zirâ*'/7390,5 metres in 1122 (1710), which means the delay in the repairs caused more damage. A certain Hasan, the *kapıcıbaşı* of *Dergah-ı Mualla*, was appointed as *mübaşir* and the restoration began.⁶⁸ Timber used in the restoration was brought from the mountains of the Gökova subprovince in the Menteşe province. 10.000 *müdevver kazıklık*, round stakes, and 1200 *kuşaklık*, and other timber varieties were needed for the restoration. The administration demanded Maryolzade Mustafa Paşa, who was the chief captain paşa, to ship this equipment to the port of Ebu Kır in two special ships called *Zağra Şaykas*. Also, one villager was hired with two camels from each village around Alexandria, Reşid and Ebu Kır for transporting soil that would be used during the repairs. The price was paid by the central government. The

64 C.NF, 1605.

65 We can trace the dates of repairs in different fragment of the walls alongside the Mediterranean in 1701, 1710, 1718, 1728, 1740, 1743, 1745-46, 1761-62, 1767, and 1785, and finally in 1801 after the French expedition.

66 MMD, vol. 1, nr. 256.

67 C.NF, 202.

68 MMD, vol. 1, nr. 252.

decree ordered the governor to pay villagers in regular price and ask them not to leave the repairing site until the work was done.

The biggest portion of the cost was for the timber - 11.200 trees timber/*ağaçlık kereste*: 15 and a half *misri kese*. The central government paid for this amount; and the rest, 37 and a half *misri kese* and 8334 *para* was to be compensated from *hulvan-ı kura*, the revenue from selling the *iltizam* of villages.⁶⁹ The whole process was planned by the Egyptian administration before the *mübaşir* arrived in Egypt. The centre nonetheless asked *ehl-i hibre* and *mübaşir* to visit and inspect the repaired area after the completion of the repairs, and inform the centre of the exact amount of money spent.

Another restoration case of 1745 is especially remarkable as the central government questioned the ethics of the local administrative elements. The Egyptian peasants and local administration sent a petition and informed the centre that the walls between Ebu Kır and Madiye had been damaged, and a couple of villages in Buhayra were flooded by the sea water.⁷⁰ This wall's stability and durability was especially important as it was adjacent to Eşrefiyye water canal in some parts, which carried fresh water from the Nile. Demolition of 1.5 metres of the wall would both ruin the fresh water of Alexandria and flood the rice fields in Dimyat and Reşid. In order to prevent this, with the petition of peasants, the governor went to the site and inspected the endangered walls with architects and engineers. The officers identified the demolished area, and determined the required equipment. This time the timber was brought from Rumelia, and the other materials, such as stone and lime, were procured around Alexandria.⁷¹ The repaired site was measured by the exploration group as being 10-12 *zirâ'*/7.58 metres of width and 2 *zirâ'*/1.5 metres of height. However, since the weather was not suitable for construction, they decided to wait.⁷² Topçu Mehmed Said was assigned as the *mübaşir* of the project by the centre.⁷³ Also, other technicians were employed: one *hasşa mimar*/architect *halifesi*,⁷⁴ two pumpermen, "*dikkatlerinde mâhir*", proficient stonemasons, a specialist called *burgucu* and carpenters.⁷⁵ The document does not provide enough information to follow up whether these people went and started their work. Nonetheless, in a following decree record, we see the name of a new *mübaşir*, Cebeci Başî Mustafa, and equipment such as timber, stone

69 MMD, vol. 1, nr. 255.

70 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 199.

71 "...ol taraflardan tedariki mühimm olan taş ve kireç ve levazım-ı sairesi hazır ve amade ettirilip ve bilad-ı Rumîye'den gönderilecek ecnâs-ı kereste ve mühimmat dahi sefineler ile irsal olunup mevsim-i mezkûr duhül eylediği saat binâsına mübaşeret eylemek şartıyla..." (MMD, vol. 6, nr. 199)

72 Zira in the building: 3000 zira' = 2400 m. Suraiya Faroqhi, *Devletle Başa Çıkmak* (Istanbul: Alfa Yayınları, 2016), 42; MMD, vol. 6, nr. 239.

73 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 244.

74 Hanna points out that *mimar* was just a regular officer who did not have any involvement in the architectural processes nor had the technical expertise. Their job was administrative and official. Nelly Hanna, *Osmanlı Kahiresinde*, 17

75 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 259.

and lime were demanded from Selanik.⁷⁶ The transformation process of these materials may have been problematic, since we see that the central government allocated a ship, a *firkate*, and assigned its captain, a certain Mehmed, to stay in Alexandria until the end of the project and to provide support if needed.⁷⁷ Ordering a ship captain to stay in Alexandria, the edicts sent one after another shows that the central government cared for the repair and organised sources, sometimes even from other provinces of the empire.

However, after less than 20 years, the same walls required another repair.⁷⁸ The central government assigned a certain Ahmed, from *Hacegan-ı* Divan-ı Hümayun, with the rank of cavalry/*süvari mukabeleciliği*, as the building trustee.⁷⁹ This time, the centre consulted the governor of Egypt and Ahmed to discuss and determine the authority of Ahmed as the building trustee, and prevent the intervention of any other party in the construction process. Also, the construction materials (lime, stone, nails, columns) were to be purchased at affordable prices.⁸⁰ The amount of 15.000 *guruş* was to be compensated from the *cizye* of Egypt.⁸¹ Some materials for the repair were also sent from Istanbul: 400 oak panels - *elvah-ı meşe*, 80 *on arşın kebirî*, 830 *saray manası*, 400 *bayağı mâne*, 350 hutches - *dolap*, 850 *dorke/dürgü* and 100 *qantar* miscellaneous nails. A decree was sent to the head of customs officers in Alexandria not to charge taxes from the ship.⁸² Again, another problem occurred during the project: the governor Ebu Bekir Paşa died, the project somehow stopped, and the incomplete construction site was damaged by the moist environment of the area, which ultimately increased the costs. The correspondence sent by Divan-ı Hümayun defined the situation as “*hasâret-i beytülmâl-i müslimîn*”, damage to the Muslims’ common property. The correspondence underlines the fact that the construction previously carried out by Topçu Başı Mustafa, who was now promoted to the rank of Cebeci Başı, was still more robust, and demanded the local officers to complete the project with the same high quality. This decree record suggests that the centre had agents in Egypt who sent detailed information about these projects. In the decree sent to the current *mübaşir*, it reminded him that he was previously employed in many building works and this job was given to him due to his loyalty. The decree also demanded him to investigate the real reason of the failure in the project: whether the reason for the delay in the construction was due to the negligence of the Egyptian governor and *ümera* in the supply of materials and labour, or attacks by the Bedouin Arabs.⁸³

A following decree record answers this question: the reason for the delay in the repair work

76 We can see that Divan refers to Cebeci Başı Mustafa’s repair as a solid and strong one: “...*fena olmayacak vecihle sabıkan Cebeci başı Mustafa -dame mecduhu-nun 59 tarihinde bina ve tamir eylediği mahal gibi kemal-i metanet ve resanet üzere bina ve tamir ...*” (MMD, vol.8, nr. 78).

77 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 264.

78 C.NF, 84.

79 C.NF, 2386.

80 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 77.

81 BOA, Cevdet Eyalet-i Mümtaze (C.MTZ hereafter), 349.

82 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 81.

83 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 222.

of the wall was that the *mübaşir* did not start the construction until the Egyptian governor Selanikli Ahmed Paşa came to Cairo from Sayda, and that *ümera* neglected the ruined state of the wall.⁸⁴ The construction of the walls was completed in 1178/1764, and at the end of the construction, the expense book was to be sent to Istanbul by the governor of Egypt and the building trustee.⁸⁵

The walls needed another repair in 1199/1785. The Egyptians presented a petition to the centre. In order to emphasise the need for the repair and its urgency, the locals underlined that if the walls were not repaired immediately, the villages around Buhayra would be flooded by sea water. Also, the *bender*, the commercial area and the port, would be *harab*, ruined, and the port would be out of order. Ali Hulusi Efendi was assigned as *mübaşir* or *bina emini* with the rank of *mevkufatçı*.⁸⁶ Divan-ı Hümayun asked Ali Hulusi to make an exploratory trip to the site with the governor of Egypt, *şeyhülbeled*⁸⁷ and *ehl-i vukuf*. We do not know whether the governor and *şeyhülbeled* actually attended the trip to Alexandria, but had they gone to Egypt, contemporary chroniclers would most probably have not missed the trip and would have mentioned it.⁸⁸ Ali Hulusi had an order at hand demanding him to compensate the expenses of the restoration from *irsaliye-i hazine* and taxes of *jizya*. After the exploration, they estimated the repair would cost 147.600 *rumi guruş*.⁸⁹ The material for the construction such as stone, lime, and soil were to be supplied from the surrounding villages.⁹⁰ The repair process was completed in 1786.⁹¹

The language used in the decrees is remarkable. First, the central government demands Hulusi Ali not to lose time and start the restoration works immediately, as it was, "*ehemm-i umurdan*", among the most important of affairs. However, following decree records show that somehow Hulusi Ali did not work at the needed pace in organizing the workers, and months later, a decree demanded him to "*akıl ve şuûrunu başına cem' edüp*", pull together his mind and senses and finish the work, not to waste time with corresponding, and if he was not going to finish the job, he was demanded to return back to Istanbul.⁹²

As we can follow from the archival documents, the next *sedd* repair was in 1801, most probably after the French expedition. The walls of Alexandria could not avoid the devastating effects of war. The contemporary chronicler al-Jabarti mentions that the French damaged the

84 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 247.

85 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 323.

86 MMD, vol. 10, nr. 33.

87 *Şeyhülbeled* was a title embraced by powerful mamluk beys in the first half of the eighteenth century. For detail see Engel, *Ottoman Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century*, 72-75.

88 The number of the contemporary chronicles written for Egypt is few. Al-Jabarti is almost the only one to apply for the second half of the century. Abdurrahman b. Hasan Al-Jabarti, *Aja'ib al-Athar fi'l-Tarajim wa'l-Akhbar*, ed. Abdurrahim Abdurrahman Abdurrahim (Cairo, 1997).

89 HH, 29/1360; BOA, Cevdet Bahriye (C.BH), 11695.

90 MMD, vol. 9, nr. 734.

91 MMD, vol. 10, nr. 75.

92 C.NF, 1617.

walls along the Mediterranean and let the agricultural land to be ruined by the salty sea water.⁹³ A decree suggests that during the struggles against the French army, the British deliberately demolished a part of the walls in order to make an artificial lake. After the European armies left Egypt, a number of restorations were carried out in the region and the expenses were compensated from the customs taxes of Alexandria and Reşid.⁹⁴ The fertile lands that had been protected by the locals and the central government were flooded with sea water but we can trace that the restoration endeavours started right away. Another point we should mention is the European nationality of some of the engineers. Although almost all the technical experts who worked on the restorations are anonymous, the archival documents mention a few of them, mostly bureaucrats appointed from Istanbul to oversee the project. However, with the beginning of the nineteenth century, we come across some European engineers being employed in the maintenance projects. Occasionally, the documents include their names too. For example, a certain Rhode, a Swede engineer, worked in the repairs in 1803.⁹⁵ The employment of foreign engineers can be evaluated as a part of the context of modernisation, a new approach that was embraced by the Ottomans during the reign of Selim III and continued over the next century.

The Ottoman documents provide an enormous amount of information about the restoration processes, not only in terms of the restoration processes, but also in some documents, even in terms of the locals' relationship with their environment. These walls undoubtedly protected the fertile agricultural lands but also were a barrier between the life in the land and sea, especially when people actually wanted to reach the sea. One example is the walls in Madiye: before these walls were restored in 1747, a small lake-like water pond on the coast was created due to the penetration of sea water on land. Some of the locals were making their livelihood via fishing and providing transportation services. However, reconstruction of the walls in 1747 put a halt to these activities. Therefore, in order to return to their previous order, these people damaged the stakes in front of the wall and created a stream towards the land letting in the sea water and its fish. This stream created a 150 metres wide lake. Accomplishing their goal, people started to fish in the lake again, however, the mud around the lake created a dangerous swamp which caused a couple of deaths among passers-by. In addition to this fishing case, there were also other boatmen that sold *safra*, a special kind of sand used in ships, to the European ships, and they also damaged the previously restored walls. Therefore, in order to prevent further damage, the central government assigned the *kadis* of Alexandria and Reşid to check upon the region every two months.⁹⁶ Also, the governor of Egypt, as well as the elders of *müteferrika* regiment, were ordered to take caution to protect state property.⁹⁷ In order to prevent people from causing harm, the warden of Ebu Kır castle and its soldiers were demanded

93 Al-Jabarti, *Ajaib al-Asar*, vol. III, 262.

94 C.MTZ, 302.

95 C.NF, 114.

96 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 431.

97 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 440.

to keep guard day and night in the region.⁹⁸ The central government also sent decrees to the local administration afterwards to protect the walls from the locals.⁹⁹ However, we can see that the repair undertaken in 1762 cost 172 *misri kese*.¹⁰⁰ These cases give some insight into the complexity of the task and outline the challenges involved for all those involved.

Maintenance of Eşrefiye Canal

The canal providing the water for the city, port and castle of Alexandria had a crucial importance. These structures linked the rural areas of Egypt to the imperial administration centre, as the situation of a canal or dam could have empire-wide consequences.¹⁰¹ As mentioned above, the city did not have any fresh water resources. Thus, it depended on sources from outside. Therefore, the canals' maintenance was almost more important than the *sedds*.¹⁰² From the perspective of the state, it was well understood that the vital needs of the city's residents were dependent on sustainable water sources and had to be met to sustain the port's existence and create a suitable environment for commerce. The water brought through the canal was stored in cisterns under houses in the neighbourhoods. The documents, as well as European travellers, state the number of cisterns as 210, of which ten were out of order until they were renovated in the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ While the *sedds*, walls, protected the agricultural lands, the canals and cisterns served the needs for drinking water and irrigation in summers.¹⁰⁴

The archival records show that the maintenance of the Eşrefiye canal was undertaken twice in the eighteenth century: in the 1730s and 1760s. A decree provides information about these repairs. In 1732, since the canal was silted up and had not been dredged, only a small amount of water was reaching Alexandria. The dwellers had to mix it with sea water and drink it.¹⁰⁵ While the rich had the chance to bring fresh water from Reşid via sea with ships called *cerim*, the poor had to make their way to Cairo and carry the water on the back of donkeys. Therefore, the need for the maintenance work was conveyed to the imperial administration. The response to the petition was at first negative. The Divan-ı Hümayun, by checking the court registers and other records, informed the local administration that, it realised that the government had never paid for such maintenance work before and told them to instead organise a local team to clean the sand from the canal.¹⁰⁶ The governor, deputy judge of Alexandria, and *ayan*, namely *ümera-i Mısriyye* and *mültezims*, were to organise and buy the materials needed such as stone,

98 MMD, vol. 6, nr. 471.

99 MMD, vol. 8, nr. 440.

100 BOA, Baş Muhasebe Mısır Hazinesi (D.BŞM.MSR hereafter), 7/30.

101 Mikhail, *Nature and Empire*, 3.

102 For detail about the Eşrefiye canal see Güneş, *İskenderiye limanı*, 11-15.

103 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 393; MMD, vol. 5, nr. 430.

104 Mikhail, *Under Osman's Tree*, 19.

105 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 2.

106 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 2.

lime and timber; and the peasants would provide the muscle.¹⁰⁷ Although the earlier decrees were determined not to spend from the government's financial sources on this project and let them do it with local sources, later decrees implied that it was an urgent matter and the city was facing ruin.¹⁰⁸ At first, the government asked the locals to compensate the maintenance cost from the income of the villages in Buhayra, Garbiye and Menufiye, but later approved that they meet the expenses from the *irsaliye*.¹⁰⁹ There is not much detail about how the local administration convinced the imperial government to pay, but we can see that the government ultimately agreed, while warning the locals to clean the canal annually so that similar cases would not happen in the near future, and also assigned the governor, *ümera-i Mısriyye*, head officers of seven regiments and the judge of Alexandria. Nonetheless, we can see another maintenance project was undertaken in 1763.

Conclusion

The dikes near Alexandria were crucially important to protect agricultural land and the potability of drinking water on which its inhabitants depended. Disintegrating over time, sometimes due to the Mediterranean waves and other times due to the misuse of locals, the central government took up the responsibility of repairing and restoring these walls. These repairs were significant investments, costing large sums of money, and requiring considerable work force and time, yet, the walls were always taken care of by Istanbul, even though nature demolished them, occasionally even before the restoration process had been completed. While Istanbul provided financial support and organisation, the expertise and workforce were mostly local. The primary sources provide a great deal of information about the restoration and show us how much money and effort were invested in the maintenance of the walls near Alexandria, the extent of the organisational skills of the state agents and the use of local means.

The maintenance of these walls in Alexandria supports the argument that the central government never hesitated to invest in the maintenance of the dikes around Alexandria in order to protect agricultural production. Maintaining the canals and walls, the central administration intended and achieved stability for the population of Alexandria, which carried out commerce and agricultural production. It was this approach that guaranteed income and revenue and was useful for the reaya, as well as the imperial government's legitimization.

Although it always used local expertise, Istanbul always managed and oversaw the repair processes via a *mübaşir* sent from Istanbul. More importantly, the central government provided the materials that Egypt lacked, particularly timber from Anatolia. Current historiography underlines that the state provided financial sources for the maintenance of agricultural places,

107 MMD, vol. 5, nr. 2. The same decree was also sent to the judge of Alexandria and people, '*ahali*', of Alexandria: MMD, vol. 5, nr. 3.

108 C.NF, 1284.

109 C.NF, 1284; MMD, vol. 5, nr. 393: "...*gereği gibi tanzif ve tathir ve ziyâde bir akçe mutâlebe eylemeyüp ve fazlası kalır ise cânib-i mîrîye redd eylesesi.*".

however, during the maintenance process, it turned to the local expertise. The Egyptian peasantry had the opportunity to inform the imperial capital whenever needed and start the process of maintenance. The legal system was also involved.

Depending on the imperial archives, this study shows that while it paid the costs of such projects, the imperial government also pushed the local administration to continue the practice of *imece*, collective maintenance work undertaken by the peasants via the organisation of *mültezims*. These maintenance works were obviously a part of the irrigation code of the province and, in the eighteenth century, the locals started to ignore these duties, which ultimately caused more damage and increased expenses. The maintenance work of the Eşrefiye canal also explicitly shows the government's claim that they had not paid for such maintenance before and it was the locals' duty to preserve the canal. Nevertheless, the overall picture shows us that the conventional manner followed by the imperial government in maintaining and repairing dikes, dams and cisterns in Egypt in the eighteenth century mostly ran smoothly. Peasants, local notables, governor and *kadi* of Egypt worked hand in hand with the central government, with *ehl-i hibre* playing the lead role. We can see that even during times of chaos and conflict, such as during Bulutkapan Ali Bey's uprising, the repair processes were not ignored with the state taking care of the repairs and expenses. The most important factor behind this policy can be seen as the conventional approach of the Ottoman government. At first glance, it could be argued that the repair projects were simply followed by the government to preserve its income sources. However, it also maintained the capital and protected the Egyptian *reaya* too. The maintenance projects, ultimately, guaranteed the income of elite *iltizam* holders in the region and maintained the image of a sultan who invested in the periphery and did not hesitate to spend from his *Ceyb-i Hümayun*.

The maintenance projects were implemented by the locals. Compared to the nineteenth century's canal clearing projects of Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Paşa, these projects were humane and show us that the centre spent on the province's infrastructure in a regular manner. Contradicting with the centre-periphery theory, these records show that the Ottomans sustained and maintained its peripheries, did not exploit the province, and did not hesitate to spend large amounts to sustain its production as well as support the local people. On the other hand, it consistently demanded the administrators to carry out maintenance and repairs based on convention and not to damage state property and local structures.

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