

KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

Alan Mikhail (2011), **Nature and Empire in Otoman Egypt: An Environmental History**, (NY: Cambridge University Press).

Recent debates on environmental problems and issues have raised awareness and environmental consciousness of Ottoman historians. They have started to use methodologies of environmental history and look at the past from an environmental viewpoint. One of the leading historians in the fledgling field of Ottoman environmental history is Alan Mikhail, whose dissertation has been recently revised and published under the title “Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History”. Mikhail’s study is an exploration of the environmental dimensions of past events in pre-modern Egypt. It mainly deals with the social and environmental history of water usage and irrigation in the Egyptian countryside in the period stretching from 1675 to 1820. The author focuses on the control, use, management, and conservation of water resources and canals in Ottoman Egypt in the ‘long eighteenth century’. Nevertheless, his study is not only a book on “water”. As the title suggests, Mikhail attempts to draw a larger picture by placing nature and empire into the same frame. In doing so, he references the empire and nature's struggle with diseases, animals, climate, production and consumption, as well as life and death.

The book is composed of six chapters. In the first three chapters, the author examines the natural resource management system in Ottoman Egypt in the pre-modern era. “No land ever depended on water management more than Egypt” - as the opening sentence suggests, Chapter 1 focuses on the role of water in people’s lives in the Egyptian countryside. In Chapter 2 and 3, Mikhail examines the role of waterways in the transportation of food and wood to and from Egypt. It is common knowledge that Egypt was one of the breadbaskets of the empire; it supplied large quantities of grain to İstanbul and beyond. In return, the Ottoman government provided much-needed wood supplies to Egypt. Mikhail’s argument in the first half of the book is that the success in the management of water resources, food cultivation, and timber was due to the know-how and experience of Egyptian peasants, not to the policies of Ottoman imperial government.

In the final three chapters, Mikhail examines how the period of transition from a 'feudal society' to a 'bureaucratic state' eroded traditional methods of water management. Chapter 4 focuses on the changes in labor system and Chapter 5 deals with the plague epidemics and the efforts to control it through 'modern' methods such as quarantine. In both chapters, by including stories of labor and plague over the course of the eighteenth century, Mikhail extends his argument to address Egypt's move from being an imperial province to an increasingly independent polity eliminated the autonomy of Egyptian peasants over land, water, labor, and food. In the final chapter, the author tells the story of the reconstruction of the Mahmudiyya Canal between the Nile and Alexandria. According to the author, the canal construction project represents the history of struggle between Egyptian peasants and various forms of Ottoman administration over the control of natural resources. He addresses the massive numbers of dead as a result of the canal's construction and claims that this process symbolized the end of the environmental history of Ottoman Egypt.

In short, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* is an account of the use, control, and management of the irrigation system in pre-modern Egypt, and how it coincided with Egypt's transformation from a remote Ottoman province loosely connected to the capital into a sovereign state ruled by an autarch. Mikhail's argument is clear: Egypt's move away from being a remote province of the Ottoman empire into a strong, centralized, and authoritarian polity controlled by Egyptian bureaucracy transformed the management of environmental resources. This transformation necessitated the abandonment of old ways and habits, caused tension between the local populations and Egyptian bureaucracy; and eliminated the rights of peasants over land and water use. Mikhail's book is valuable in two significant ways. First, it acknowledges the interrelation between environmental changes and political and socio-economic transformations in the Ottoman Empire. Second, it moves nature from afield to the center of historical narrative providing new environmental perspectives and approaches to historical events in Ottoman history that were once regarded as unimportant. Mikhail's work is noteworthy for its methodology, approach, and its straightforward and readable prose. There is no doubt that environmental historians will take notice of the fact that the Ottoman Empire, due to its sheer size and proximity to Europe, Asia, and Africa, its large diversity of ecological zones, climatic conditions, and environmental features has a lot to offer.

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